



HOUSE LIGHTS UP!

**Researching Relaxed Performance
for Neurodivergent Audiences in
Scotland**

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and Aby Watson

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(Birds of Paradise)

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HOUSE LIGHTS UP!

Welcome

Sound Symphony, produced
by Independent Arts Projects
and Oily Cart.
Image by Brian Hartley.



Welcome to House Lights Up!

Since its launch in 2009, FST is grateful to colleagues in the sector for their involvement in improving access for audiences through Access Scottish Theatre. During those years, we have seen a huge growth in the number of Audio Description, BSL interpreted and Captioned performances, demonstrating a genuine desire to remove barriers for audiences with access requirements.

Relaxed performances, however, were not listed within the guide main database until a website redevelopment 2017 because so few were being programmed. Before then, between 0 - 4 relaxed performances were advertised at the back of each guide on a standalone page.

Access Scottish Theatre has always championed providing audiences with as much information as possible about venue access and access provision as possible, so they can decide whether an event is for them. For instance, providing the name of BSL interpreters so that a booker can decide based on the style of that interpreter as much as on the content of a show - and how they fit together.

This is no less important with relaxed performances, but it can be a hard thing to communicate this when what makes a relaxed performance can vary a great deal. In finding ways to list and share information about relaxed performances, it became clear that this inconsistency was causing confusion with audiences, venues and companies alike.



The cessation of live performance during the pandemic, and a pause to Access Scottish Theatre's core activity, was an opportunity for us, working with Birds of Paradise, to commission research into the landscape for relaxed performances in Scotland. This will help all of us to better understand the current offer to audiences and what audiences need, now and in the future. The research explored what the gap might be we are indebted to Birds of Paradise and the researchers – Zoë Halliday, Thom Scullion and Aby Watson – for House Lights Up! This thoughtful, clearly written, in-depth and practical research provides excellent contextual information and explores, in a pragmatic way, the best ways relaxed performances can be planned, marketed and presented.

Access and inclusion are key priorities for FST, its members, funders like Creative Scotland, and the Scottish Government. We know that Scotland has a progressive and forward-looking creative sector, and we are excited to help contribute further to the work that has been done in pushing forward access to live performance.

This is a great report from Zoë, Thom, and Aby. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did and will use it to deliver the relaxed performances that neurodivergent audiences in Scotland deserve.

Fiona Sturgeon Shea

Chief Executive,
Federation of Scottish Theatre

Glossary

When a term from the glossary is used for the first time, it will be emboldened like **this**. If a term is new to you, we encourage you to visit the glossary to learn more.

In collating the report glossary definitions have been selected by the researchers from a broad range of currently available disability-centred sources - it is important to note that definitions and language are live and not all align with the Social Model of Disability.

Accessible

Accessible refers to practices, procedures, events or environments that are usable by a wide range of people, usually because barriers have been removed or are not in place in the first place. Events tend to be considered accessible if they are removing barriers to attendance.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a neurological condition that is defined through analysis of behaviour. People with ADHD show a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with day-to-day functioning and/or development.¹

Autism Spectrum Conditions

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects people in different ways. It can affect how people communicate and interact with the world.

Autistic people may experience social communication and social interaction challenges; repetitive or restrictive behaviour; over - or under - sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch; highly focused interests or hobbies; extreme anxiety; meltdowns and shutdowns.²

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- 1 ADHD UK, 2022
 - 2 National Autistic Society, 2022
 - 3 Mind UK, 2022:A

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a mental health condition that mainly affects your mood. Those with the condition are likely to have times where they experience mood states such as: manic or hypomanic episodes (feeling high), depressive episodes (feeling low) or potentially some psychotic symptoms during manic or depressed episodes.³

Break-Out Space

A space within the venue where people can go who need time away from the live performance. It should be an adaptable space with comfortable furnishing and access to natural light as well as darkness.

Inclusive

The practice of working to ensure that no one is excluded and that a wide range of people can be welcomed and partake.

Learning Disability

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities which affects someone for their whole life. People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with other people.⁴

Neurodivergent

People whose mental, cognitive or neurological function differs from what is considered typical or 'normal'. This can include - but is not limited to - those with **Autism Spectrum Conditions, Sensory Processing Conditions, Learning Disabilities, Tourette's Syndrome, ADHD, OCD** and other chronic mental health conditions such as **Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder**, or Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

Neurodiversity

The natural diversity of all human brains and minds.

⁴ Mencap, 2022

⁵ Nick Walker, cited by Autistic UK 2022

⁶ OCD UK, 2022

⁷ Mind UK, 2022:B

⁸ Understood, 2022

Neurodiversity Paradigm

The Neurodiversity Paradigm is an emergent paradigm in which neurodiversity is understood to be a form of human diversity that is subject to the same social dynamics as other forms of diversity (including dynamics of power and oppression).⁵

Neuronormativity

The dominant societal belief of neurotypicality as the default, natural, superior and 'normal' neurological function, and the social, political, cultural and personal 'norms' that maintain it.

Neurotypical

One whose mental, cognitive or neurological function is in alignment with what is considered typical or 'normal'.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is a serious anxiety-related condition where a person experiences frequent intrusive and unwelcome obsessional thoughts, commonly referred

to as obsessions [...which] result in a person carrying out repetitive behaviours or rituals in order to prevent a perceived harm and/or worry that preceding obsessions have focused their attention on⁶.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a complicated mental health problem related to psychosis. Each person's experience is unique, but characteristics may include hallucinations, delusions, wanting to avoid people, feeling disconnected from your emotions and disorganised thinking and speech.⁷

Sensory Processing Conditions

The term refers to those with trouble managing information that comes in through the senses. There are two types of sensory processing challenges - oversensitivity (hypersensitivity) and undersensitivity (hyposensitivity). Certain sounds, sights, smells, textures, and tastes can create a feeling of sensory overload.⁸

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model holds that a person isn't 'disabled' because of their impairment, health condition, or the ways in which they may differ from what is commonly considered the medical 'norm'; rather it is the physical and attitudinal barriers in society – prejudice, lack of access adjustments and systemic exclusion – that disable people.⁹

9 Shape Arts, 2022
10 Tourettes Action, 2022

Stimming

Behaviour consisting of repetitive actions, movements or noises done by neurodivergent people to self-stimulate and/or self-regulate.

Stimming can be:

Vestibular - using movement and balance, e.g. hand-flapping, rocking.

Tactile - using sensation of touch, e.g. finger tapping, stroking a surface.

Visual - using sight, e.g. staring at moving objects, repetitive blinking.

Auditory - using sound, e.g. humming or grunting, repetitive speech.

Olfactory - using smell and/or taste, e.g. licking, placing objects in mouth.

Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette Syndrome is an inherited neurological condition. The key features are tics – involuntary sounds and movements.¹⁰

Visual Story

A document containing information to prepare neurodivergent and learning disabled audience members for their visit to the theatre in an accessible, easy to understand format. It contains visual information on what to expect of the performance and the venue.

HOUSE LIGHTS UP!

Act One

Setting the Scene

Back and Forth and Forth and
Back by Aby Watson.
Image by Tiu Makkonen



About House Lights Up!

What is the project?

House Lights Up! is a research project undertaken as part of Access Scottish Theatre, commissioned by The Federation of Scottish Theatre and produced by Birds of Paradise Theatre Company in collaboration with the researchers, Aby Watson, Thom Scullion and Zoë Halliday. It investigates what the performing arts industry in Scotland can do to make **relaxed performances** more accessible for audiences to attend. It does this by considering the research from two perspectives: **neurodivergent audiences** and the **Scottish performance sector**.

What are the aims?

House Lights Up! aims to:

- evaluate the current provision of relaxed performance in Scotland;
- develop better understanding within the sector about what relaxed performance is;
- investigate how venues can better support and include neurodivergent audiences;
- instigate ongoing commitment to provide accessible performance in Scottish theatres.

What do we mean by relaxed performances?

Relaxed performance (RP) is a term that can be applied to productions and events that have been made accessible to audiences who are usually excluded from theatre environments, because they find it difficult to follow the restrictive conventions of traditional theatre etiquette. This can include - but is not limited to - people with **Autism Spectrum Conditions** and other **neurodivergent** conditions such as **Tourette's Syndrome** or **ADHD**, those with a **learning disability**, those bringing children to the theatre, and people with **dementia** or **Alzheimer's**.

For the scope of this research, we are focusing on relaxed performances for audiences that identify as neurodivergent, with or without a diagnosis.

What do we mean by neurodivergent?

The research of **House Lights Up!** understands neurodivergence through the **Social Model of Disability**, which understands disability as an experience caused by societal structures and barriers that exclude and disable people with impairments.

This research is informed by the **Neurodiversity Paradigm**, and is inclusive of the self-identification or self-diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions. It is important to acknowledge that not everyone is able to receive - or is wanting of - a formal medical diagnosis of their neurodivergent condition.

Who are the partners?

Federation of Scottish Theatre (FST) is Scotland's membership and development body for professional dance, opera and theatre. FST Membership reaches over 250 independent artists, producing companies, venues, education and umbrella bodies across Scotland. FST brings the sector together to speak with a collective voice, to share resources and expertise and to promote collaborative working.

Birds of Paradise Theatre Company (BOP) is Scotland's leading disability-led theatre company which has been putting the stories of disabled people on stage since 1993. BOP also works to develop the next generation of disabled performers and theatre

practitioners while also supporting others nationally and internationally to improve their disability equality and inclusion practices.

Access Scottish Theatre (AST) is a multi-form marketing platform for accessible performances in Scotland. Established by FST in 2009 as part of a wider initiative to address access in the Scottish theatre sector, AST and its twenty members of venues, national performing companies and festivals, promote accessible performances to audiences.

Who are the researchers?



Zoë Halliday is a Scottish, neurodivergent performer and facilitator based in Glasgow. She holds a BA Musical Theatre (2012) and MEd Learning and Teaching in Performing Arts (2018) from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Zoë specialised in Drama and Autism with her Master's thesis, titled 'Guiding Principles to Relaxed Performance'. She is founder and CEO of RAP: Relaxed Accessible Performance which provides support and guidance in making events/ organisations accessible.



Thom Scullion is a neurodivergent artist, facilitator and researcher based in Glasgow. Through his postgraduate research at the Glasgow School of Art, Thom's research focused on participatory performance, roleplaying games and audience co-authorship. He has co-facilitated on three distinct research projects about drama and autism for Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, National Theatre Scotland and National Autistic Society Scotland. In 2019, he co-hosted Artists Talk Autism with artist Steven Fraser, a panel event as part of NTS' Engine Room programme.



Aby Watson is a neurodivergent dance artist, performer, and researcher who makes playful, sensuous and stimulating dance that seeks to disrupt exclusive neuronormative values. A passionate advocate for the inclusivity, safety and equal equity of neurodivergent people in the performance sector, she founded the Scottish Neurodiverse Performance Network and is currently undertaking her PhD, titled Disordering Dance, at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Methodology

To garner a holistic and balanced perspective, this research focuses on the experiences of two separate demographics at the heart of the inquiry: **neurodivergent audiences** and **industry professionals** of venues in the Scottish theatre sector. This research takes a qualitative approach with the use of focus groups to gather descriptive data that captures the experiences and understandings of the participants involved. An initial review of relevant literature on RP grounds this research and is represented in the following section of this report ('Evaluating the Landscape of Relaxed Performance'). A wide range of sources were accessed, including international

and national study reports, academic papers, press articles, and the websites of various venues and organisations offering relaxed work.

Participants across both audience and industry focus groups reflected different geographical locations across Scotland and due to the Covid-19 restrictions in place, all focus group sessions were held via video conference. Focus groups were semi-structured, with formulated research questions offering discussion structure but facilitated with flexibility and responsiveness that allowed conversation to flow and to be guided by the groups.

Industry Focus Groups

The industry focus groups were recruited through direct communication with venues across the Scottish theatre sector, with participating venues putting forward the appropriate staff member - this ranged from positions, such as Artistic Director to Front of House. In total, 12 participants were gathered as representatives from theatres and performance venues across Scotland. Three separate groups were held to ensure everyone had the opportunity to contribute.



Touretteshero smiling and helping a small child make a costume at Touretteshero's event Brewing in Battersea.
Image by Kevin Moran.

Audience Focus Groups

The neurodivergent audiences focus groups were recruited by an open-call out disseminated by BOP via their website, supported and circulated by a social media announcement and an email call out disseminated to organisations such as National Autistic Society Scotland and Capability Scotland. After an initial expression of interest, 23 neurodivergent and learning disabled people were invited to participate.

- Participants reflected a diverse spectrum of neurodivergent and learning disabled people and/or their support/carers.
- Eleven participants were organised across the four focus groups to allow enough space to hear contributions from all participants.

- The groups were held as a 'relaxed' session, including an announcement of the relaxed nature at the start of the session, permission for individuals to do what needed for this space to be a comfortable, safe and welcoming space, i.e. move, stim, get up etc.
- Options for cameras to be either on or off were given, alongside the offer to either voice or type responses with the chat function - whichever was preferred.
- It was noted that a digital only meeting on Zoom may create barriers for certain participants with alternate communication preferences and/or needs. In different circumstances, both the option of an in-person or digital focus group would have been offered to participants.

Following the focus groups, the research team carried out thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts to identify important emergent topics. All participants will remain anonymous throughout this report and will be referred to with numerical reference (P1, P2 etc.) where required.



Scottish Ballet -
The Snow Queen Inclusive Performance.
Image by Stuart Armitt

Evaluating the Landscape of Relaxed Performance

What is Relaxed Performance?

There is not currently an objective, definitive answer to what constitutes a successful RP. At present, there are no standardised industry guidelines or best practice. The access strategies implemented and resources offered can vary widely in accordance to each venue, meaning that there are multiple possibilities for ensuring a successful RP in practice.

RPs aim to create a non-judgemental, welcoming and more flexible space for audiences to enjoy live performance. They give permission for an audience to be themselves and to authentically

react to the performance, without worrying about adapting or trying to fit in with the codified behaviour of the theatre. They traditionally offer a relaxed environment that allows for noise and movement from the audience, provide a **break-out space** separate to the auditorium for those who need a break, and may adopt an 'open door' policy - allowing audience members to leave and return to the performance space when, and as, they wish. Aspects of the performance itself may also be adapted to cater to sensory sensitivities, which may include lower levels of sound and

light, the removal of sudden sounds or flashes of light, and house lights remaining up at some level in the auditorium.

Everyone should be able to access and benefit from engaging with live performance and feel welcome in cultural spaces - regardless of the complexity of their disability. RPs are essential in making this happen, by relaxing the etiquette and conventions expected when accessing theatre, relaxing levels of light and sound to cater for sensory sensitivities, and putting measures in place to ensure

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cultural venues are welcoming, inclusive and safe spaces for neurodivergent and learning disabled people and their families/carers. The practice of RP provides a navigable route and opportunity for venues to welcome a historically overlooked and excluded audience demographic, to further develop a culture of inclusion within the theatre sector.

There are essentially two distinct approaches to venues presenting RPs:

A 'bespoke cultural offer'¹ where **a performance is made specifically for neurodivergent, learning disabled audiences** - created as a relaxed performance from the ground up.

The other approach '**applies an inclusive accessibility scheme**'² to **pre-existing performances** initially made for mainstream audiences, and adapts the performance to become accessible for people who may be disabled by a normative theatre environment.

Both avenues of practice are valid and suitable for different types of work, however **for the purposes of this report we will be focusing solely on the second option - the application of 'an inclusive accessibility scheme' to pre-existing performances.**

There may also be additional resources offered to audience members to make their experience more comfortable and accessible; this can include self-regulation tools such as ear-defenders, **stimming** toys or sunglasses to help reduce sensory overwhelm, or can be stimuli to aid familiarity and understanding, such as a **visual story** that clearly outlines what to expect from the performance and the venue.

1 Ciné-ma Différence, 2020:19

2 Ibid.

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Touretteshero, a London-based company co-founded by Jess Thom - a neurodivergent artist, performer, playworker and activist with Tourette's Syndrome - is an international leader in the relaxed performance movement. They encourage that venues develop their own unique house-style of delivering relaxed performances that suits their ethos, brand and practice³, but are clear that certain key principles⁴ of relaxed performances must remain consistent across venues and approaches.

Those principles are:

1. A clear explanation for all audience members about what a relaxed performance is when they book.

2. Pre-show information that clearly describes the show so that anyone can make an informed choice about whether it's something they want to see.

3. Staff who take an inclusive approach from start to finish.

4. Consideration given to the production's sound and lighting levels, taking into account sensory sensitivities: for example, strobes or sudden loud noises might be removed.

5. An introduction at the start of the show – ideally by one of the actors – to remind the audience that it's a relaxed performance and giving anyone who needs to move or be noisy the freedom to do so. Audience members should also be able to move around, leave and return to their seat at any point.

6. A clear plan for how any complaints from audience members will be managed.

7. A quiet space outside the auditorium where people can go during the show if they need to.

3 Touretteshero, 2016

4 State of Theatre Access, 2019

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The responsibility of making a show 'relaxed' is mutually shared between the venue, the audience and the performers, and all parties are crucial in maintaining a successful relaxed environment.⁵ Currently, as there is no universal and objective 'tick-list' of RP methods and procedures, the resources offered and overall approach will differ from venue to venue.

5 Touretteshero, 2016

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"There are two critical elements of relaxed performances: the reduction or elimination of barriers for people with diverse needs, and the literal relaxing of social norms around what's considered 'appropriate' theatre behavior.

Next City, 2019

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Scottish Ballet - The Snow Queen Inclusive Performance.

Image by Stuart Armitt

Why Relaxed Performance?

Accessibility for disabled audiences in the theatre sector is improving, with access provisions such as BSL interpretation, captioning and audio description increasingly commonplace. However, those with complex needs - such as autistic, learning disabled or neurodivergent people, and those with mental or psychiatric disorders - are still largely excluded from accessing live performance and cultural venues. By relaxing performance we can **reduce exclusion**, address **policy and legislative commitments** and **improve audience experience** for disabled and non-disabled people alike. Barriers that exclude range from practical to attitudinal:

- audio visual effects within productions;
- lack of tolerance for the expression of non-traditional behaviour in our theatres including noise and movement;
- lack of option to walk around or leave and return to the performance space a few, or even many, times during a production;

- busy foyers crowded with people; a lack of clear signage to navigate the space; loud noise and bright lights.

The strictly codified etiquette of being still, silent and focused for the whole duration of the performance may make experiencing live performance and accessing culture impossible for some disabled people. Furthermore, for those with particular sensory sensitivities, the normative levels of light and sound of theatre productions can be overwhelming, unpleasant and even painful - further making the experience of those audiences accessing theatre and culture out of the question.

For neurodivergent and learning disabled people and their families and/or carers, accessing theatre can be a risky, highly stressful and vulnerable endeavour. Without considerations and provisions of access in place, it can lead to self-censorship by those audiences - they may avoid such cultural spaces altogether due to feeling as if they don't belong or that seeing live performance as inherently 'not for them'.

When those neurodivergent and learning disabled people and their families/carers brave attending the theatre, they may face hostile reactions from other audience members, like dirty looks, shushing, critical remarks, complaints to the venue, and - in some instances - being asked to leave. Thus making their attempt at accessing culture a highly upsetting and difficult experience, potentially reinforcing the belief that they are not welcome in such spaces. A lack of awareness, consideration and knowledge by cultural venues in addressing these issues can further maintain the exclusion of neurodivergent and learning disabled people, and can leave such audiences navigating the difficult experience alone, unsupported and bearing the brunt of the emotional labour.

Relaxed performances are true to a democratic perspective on theatre that allows people to be themselves in a space and respond authentically to what they are seeing, hearing, and/or feeling.

Ciné-ma Différence, 2020:7



Sound Symphony, produced
by Independent Arts Projects
and Oily Cart.
Image by Brian Hartley

Overwhelmingly, where an effective offer of RP has been made, there have been positive outcomes for both audiences and venues. The Relaxed Performance Project, 2012/13, reported positive outcomes for audiences including increased confidence and self-esteem, enjoyment, inspiration and motivation; while the venues who partnered on the project reported they had developed new, increased and diverse audiences.⁶ RPs can also be beneficial beyond the explicit target audience. Family members and carers of neurodivergent or learning-disabled people who are also excluded from mainstream cultural activities are able to participate. Additionally, a relaxed attitude to theatre etiquette can benefit people who may find busy public spaces stressful, people who need to go out several times during a performance, people with babies or young children, or people who find it hard to sit still for long periods.⁷

⁶ Relaxed Performance Project, 2013:6
⁷ Ciné-ma Différence, 2020:35

Medea at Edinburgh
International Festival.
Relaxed Space
Image by Jassy Earl



“The right to culture, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is eagerly seized by Autistic spectators when accommodations are offered to make them accessible.

Fletcher-Watson, 2016

The Policy and Legal Argument

RP provision is clearly applicable to 'Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion', one of four connecting themes Creative Scotland describe as running through all aspects of their work and legal obligations:

In 2014, Creative Scotland published its ten-year plan, which sets out priorities including (Ambition #2)⁸:

Ensure that everyone can engage with the work we fund, whoever or wherever they are.

Foster an environment where participants, audiences and consumers value and can confidently engage with the arts, screen and creative industries.

Based on Creative Scotland's ambitions, it is clear that there is a strategic requirement to provide accessible performances for neurodivergent audiences of all ages, and it is clearly stated that any organisation supported by Creative Scotland has a responsibility to provide and actively facilitate equal opportunity for neurodivergent audiences to access live performances.

This need is further backed up in the Culture Strategy for Scotland, published by the Scottish Government in 2020, which states that factors including disability can 'impact individuals and communities' ability to access and participate in culture and tackling this must be a priority for the culture sector in Scotland.⁹

All theatre venues in Scotland also fall under the jurisdiction of the Equality Act 2020 in their own provision of goods and services to disabled people.

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As a public body, Creative Scotland has a responsibility ... under the Equality Act 2010, to ... advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not, and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. We share these responsibilities with the organisations we fund.

Creative Scotland, 2022

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8 Creative Scotland, 2014
9 Scottish Government, 2020

What are the advances in Relaxed Performance?

State of Theatre Access Audit 2019

Over April and May 2019, organisations VocalEyes, Stagertext, Leeds Playhouse and Touretteshero, coordinated an audit of the websites of 629 theatres across the UK, funded by Arts Council England.¹⁰ They recorded the disability access information provided by each theatre, alongside the number of upcoming performances that were listed as having an access service - including RPs. Their findings offer an opportunity to comprehend the landscape of RP across different regions of the UK, and to understand Scotland's level of provision in comparison.

Their findings showed that of the 629 professional theatres in the audit, 126 (20%) listed at least one RP, with an increase of 11 more theatres than the previous audit in 2017. Of those theatres, they listed 290 RPs of 197 productions - with, on average, 1.47 RPs offered for each production. The regions of London, South East England and West Midlands provided the most RPs per head of the population. With theatres that provide RPs, the audit found that they did so for 13% of their productions, on average. However, regions that were above that average were London (31%), East Midlands (17%), Scotland (15%) and South East (15%).

From this data, we can see that although the offer of RP spans across the UK, it is not uniform - with disparate access and availability across nations and regions. 80% of theatres across the UK failed to provide any RPs at all - which signifies a national problem for the access of culture to neurodivergent and disabled audiences who would otherwise access RPs.

¹⁰ VocalEyes, 2019

How does Scotland compare?

Although Scotland offers 2% more than the national average for the number of RPs in venues, it sits ninth in the ranking of the ratio of RPs to population size - with this data finding that only 11% of Scottish theatres provided at least one RP in 2019. Regarding other access services, Scotland sits in second place for the provision of Dementia-friendly performances, fourth place for both the provision of performances with British Sign Language and captioning, and 11th place for Audio Description. This signifies that in some ways Scottish theatre is leading on audience accessibility, but the provision of RPs in Scotland is behind in comparison to other nations and regions of the UK.

Unicorn Dance Party from Sarah-Rose Graber and Ruxy Cantir. Produced by Raw Material Arts.
Image by Andy Phillipson



Radical Advances

The world's first Relaxed Venue, Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in London, is a major development for the Relaxed movement in the UK. It takes it a step further by widening the focus from just relaxing performances to relaxing the cultural spaces that those performances take place in - the venues themselves. Jess Thom and Touretteshero have been instrumental to this radical shift in BAC's approach. BAC has committed to Touretteshero's process and method of relaxing venues to make the whole experience of visiting arts venues inclusive, accessible and welcoming for neurodivergent and disabled audiences.

The 'Relaxed Venue Method' goes beyond just challenging the theatre etiquette that disables neurodivergent audiences, and takes a multi-sensory, multi-faceted approach to embed a relaxed philosophy across the venue and all its activities. Since autumn 2018, over 90% of performances at BAC have been relaxed to the benefit of wide ranging audiences, including those with autism, dementia, learning disabilities and also those with very loud laughs. Touretteshero and BAC are encouraging other venues to take up the Relaxed Method, which is open to any venue that wishes to rethink their approach to access and take up the process.

"So often access is seen simply as the domain of what happens front of house, but it's way more nuanced and complex than simply saying BAC has made all their performances relaxed. It's about challenging the producing, creating and leadership processes. At its heart, a relaxed venue flips the assumption about whether or not disabled people should be in those spaces – as audience, as artists, and as staff.

Jess Thom, Disability Arts International, 2019

International Conversations

Although the emergence of RP has been heavily influenced by work developed in the UK, the movement is also happening internationally with the practice and discussion of RP developing across borders.

Significant actions are currently being taken across the continents of Europe and North America, with discussion on RP developing internationally. Ciné-ma Différence, a Paris-based French organisation founded to provide inclusive cinema screenings and live performances for those 'with divergent behaviour due to disability'¹¹, conducted a survey to compare such international movements of Relaxed-type performances. Sixteen organisations that offer RPs across the UK, Canada, the United States, Sweden, Switzerland and France took part in this research, which culminated in a comparative report titled 'Relaxed Performance'¹².

Following the dissemination of Ciné-ma Différence's comparative survey, a working group of venues, organisations and individuals committed to cultivating RP was established. At the time of this report, Birds of Paradise and the researchers of 'House Lights Up!' are part of the Scottish representation at this international forum.

¹¹ Ciné-ma Différence, 2020:3

¹² Ibid.

Another significant report offering an international perspective of RP comes from British Council Canada and Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life, a multidisciplinary research project centred on activist art. This report, titled 'Relaxed Performance: Exploring Accessibility in the Canadian Theatre Landscape'¹³, surveys RP with a specific focus on the UK and Canada, and reports rigorously on the experiences and impacts of training in RP, and the impact of RP for audience attendees, alongside an environmental scan to understand the international context of RP, and how it applies to the Canadian theatre sector.

The work undergone by Ciné-ma Différence, British Council and Bodies in Translation makes clear the increasing global dialogue on RP, and the efforts being undertaken to develop a shared international understanding and practice of RP. It is clear the need to ensure equality and inclusion for the access for neurodivergent and learning disabled audiences is reflected in different global societies.

¹³ Bodies in Translation, 2020

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Act Two

Staging the Research

Scottish Opera's Dementia Friendly
performance of The Magic Flute at Theatre
Royal Glasgow. Scottish Opera 2019.
Image by James Glossop

Neurodivergent Audience Research: Findings

This section of the report discusses and analyses the findings of interviews with neurodivergent audiences. It provides a summary of the discussions that took place with emphasis on overarching themes and constant factors presented. Participants have been anonymised and are referred to as HLU1, HLU2 (which signifies the relevant focus group) and P1, P2 etc. (the particular participant).

Who is Relaxed Performance for?

The majority of participants in the audience focus groups had never attended a relaxed performance, and were largely unsure of what the relaxed format entailed. Those that had heard of relaxed performances were more familiar with RP being aimed at neurodivergent or learning-disabled children, or parents with babies. As RP historically emerged from a need to provide access to performance for neurodivergent children and their families / supporters it is unsurprising that the focus group participants tended to associate RP with children.

Despite identifying as neurodivergent, and describing how attending live performance often caused discomfort or overwhelm, many of our participants felt unsure whether relaxed performance was 'for them'. This lack of clarity over what RP is and who it is for can partly be attributed to the lack of relaxed performance available in Scotland overall, as well as its inception as an access strategy for children.

Neurodiverse Experiences of Venues

Participants described theatre venues as often being sites of stressful or overwhelming experiences. Multiple participants noted that theatres tend to have an architectural design that is uncondusive to a relaxed environment (for example, audiences crowded together in a foyer before a performance or seating arranged very closely together). This applies particularly but not exclusively to theatres based in historical buildings.

Many participants expressed that they found it stressful and overwhelming to be in a crowd at a theatre venue. The situations that were described as most stressful tended not to be during the actual performance, but rather transitional moments such as everyone exiting the theatre simultaneously, queuing for the toilet during an interval, or standing in a crowd in the foyer waiting for the theatre space to open. Participants suggested that it would be helpful if

“Where do you go as an adult to enjoy the show where you can sit with your headphones on and not look like a weirdo?”

HLU2, P1

“I think consistency [about] what relaxed performances [are] would be a wonderful step in the right direction for the future of accessibility, for live performance.”

HLU3, P19

“I don't see theatre a lot ... because of my autism, it's just a bit too stressful or not the right environment for me sometimes.”

HLU3, P4

“You've got all these people in this line, it can be very loud, and busy, and so overwhelming. There seems to be queuing for absolutely everything.”

HLU1, P8

venues provided opportunities to avoid crowds and queues, for example being allowed into the theatre early so they could find their seat in a less stressful environment, or being able to order drinks to be delivered to their seats, so they do not have to leave them.

Participants also described difficulties navigating their way within venues, and highlighted the importance in this regard of having highly visible signage

and easily identifiable front-of-house staff who are available to assist. Multiple participants felt that it should be standard practice for venues to provide video / interactive tours of their public spaces that audience members can use to familiarise themselves with the building before attending.

“When people are leaving the theatre, and the people all rush out at the same time, that can be quite stressful.

HLU2, P13

“One of the main barriers for me is I have difficulty navigating somewhere, so it's like if I go to a theatre ... and I need to know where to go, I need someone to explain it quite literally.

HLU2, P9



A photograph of an audience member clapped and laughing sat on a bean bag at Touretteshero's Festival of Rest & Resistance at Battersea Arts Centre.
Image by Kevin Moran

Welcoming attitude from venue

An idea that came up repeatedly in the focus group discussions was the importance of friendly front-of-house staff who can provide assistance to audience members if required. Overall, participants had had positive experiences with front-of-house staff in venues, and many had memories of specific occasions where a member of staff went 'the extra mile' to accommodate their needs.

One participant expressed that it can feel very difficult as a single audience member to ask for adjustments or accommodations when you feel like the only one who needs them. They suggested that if venues made accessibility offers more explicit, it would take the onus off individuals to request them, and would empower those with invisible differences to avail themselves of access accommodations.

“

It's very difficult to put your hand up and say, "I need this entire event to change because of me" ... I can't count the amount of times I've sat in a room, not daring to say 'This is way too loud'. I can't because I'm too self-conscious.

HLU2, P20



Scottish Opera's Dementia Friendly performance of The Magic Flute at Theatre Royal Glasgow.
Image by James Glossop.

Neurodiverse Experiences of Performances

Some participants pointed to sensory overwhelm as a barrier to enjoying performances, including bright lights, uncomfortably hot theatres, and loud or even simply uneven sound levels. An interesting point of difference came up through the focus groups in reference to audience noise. Some participants discussed a desire or need to make noise during a performance, while others pointed to audience noise as a common stressor within their own experience.

On the surface, this seems to create a conflict wherein individual needs are incompatible with each other. However, as is noted several times in Ciné-ma Différence's international comparative study, *Relaxed Performance* (2020), often the simple act of giving audiences freedom to do what they need in order to be comfortable is the key factor in helping them feel relaxed, even if they don't actually avail themselves of those options.

“ There's just a general feeling that [attending a performance] is just going to be hard, and it's just something ... I have to deal with, and nobody knows that it's actually quite hard.

HLU2, P9

Additionally as Tourettes hero's Jess Thom explains, 'lots of people are worried that if you start relaxing the rules around theatre etiquette then there's anarchy, but in my experience there isn't. It's a more comfortable way to watch theatre that doesn't ask people to put themselves through discomfort or pain or deny the humanness of their bodies'¹. While there is no ideal RP that meets everyone's needs, venues can help support larger numbers of neurodivergent audiences by having a range of options, in particular options for self-regulation such as offering ear defenders, hand-held fans, access to a break-out space, and freedom to exit and re-enter the space freely.

Some participants expressed that they had to use a lot of mental energy to concentrate on and follow a performance. This was described as being particularly challenging in a

¹ Thom, London Evening Standard, 2019

more text-heavy piece. One participant described how they sometimes found it difficult to differentiate characters from one another if they were visually similar.

Participants suggested that having more intervals throughout a performance would allow them time to absorb and process the information so that they were able to follow the performance more easily. Current RP research also highlights the usefulness of providing a visual story or summary of the performance beforehand so that audience members can familiarise themselves with the narrative and the characters in advance of watching the live performance.

“ I would have to focus to keep still. If I focused, then I would miss the show. I was choosing which one to focus on.

HLU1, P6

“ Sometimes, I'm still thinking about what just happened, and I miss what's happening right now.

HLU1, P6

“ Sometimes I have difficulty following who characters are ... If two are dressed the same, I may not be able to tell them apart because that is something that I can sometimes find difficult, faces and stuff like that.

HLU2, P16

Industry Research: Findings

This section of the report discusses and analyses the findings of industry professionals. It provides a summary of the discussions that took place with emphasis on overarching themes and factors presented. As above, participants have been anonymised and are referred to as P1, P2 etc.

Understanding of Relaxed Performance

To better understand the past and current situation of the industry, participants were asked to provide their reasoning for being involved in 'House Lights Up!'. The researchers would like to acknowledge the willingness from all persons involved. The two prominent recurring themes were as follows.



Sound Symphony, produced by
Independent Arts Projects and Oily Cart.
Image by Brian Hartley

1 A need to increase knowledge and understanding of RP to better understand what should be provided.

“...we want to get to a point where we know more so we can try and we can then find out when the best time is to do it...

P1

“...we are new to relaxed performance...to get the framework of what's expected so we can get it right from the get go.

P2

“...the will is there and the intention is there but sometimes it always feels a little bit like we are on the back foot and it would be really nice to have something we can maybe rely on to give us a bit more confidence...

P6

2 A desire to expand engagement with the neurodivergent community, either through programming or engagement, to build on audience development.

“...we have struggled to expand numbers on engagement...we felt like once we'd launched it we would build reputation but that doesn't seem to have happened as successfully as we'd have hoped...

P9

“...having much more accessibility within our actual programming is a thing I've been wanting to start a conversation about for a long time...

P10

The awareness and knowledge of RPs was extremely varied. When asked, "What is a Relaxed Performance?", a majority of participants focused on production elements. However, participants could not be specific about where this guidance came from, other than vague answers about it coming from training or advisors or being common knowledge.

This is not to say the information is unfounded but the lack of specificity regarding the source would suggest a lack of consistency. Training mentioned included: Autism Awareness training by National Autistic Society (NAS), Dementia Awareness training (provider was unknown) and consultation with local Autism support charities. The training discussed mainly focused on Autism, with a few mentions of Dementia. This would imply the training being booked in by venues is not inclusive of the different ways neurodivergence can present and is only serving a proportion of people who would benefit from RPs. As the discussions progressed it became clear the desire to succeed

“...we have the lighting different, the sound levels are different, any pyrotechnics or surprises that happen in the show in a big loud, slightly terrifying way, are gotten rid of...

P11

“I think of a space where the audience can sort of interact with the performance how they feel comfortable...I suppose I think about the technical side of it more lights in the room, maybe and like the sound being quieter.

P3

“...it was somebody who delivered autism training rather than a theatre specialism... (in reference to NAS training).

P9

could be undermined without an organisation wide agenda to support consistency of delivery or ongoing development.

When discussing the experience of audiences attending RPs, venues/organisations with more experience of programming RPs were quicker to make observations about how a venue should be a safe and comfortable space for everyone, where audiences don't feel judged. Some people also observed that an effective way to achieve this is through training for Front of House, or through tools and processes that can remove barriers such as break-out spaces and pre-show packs.

The majority of the venues attending had experience of pre-show information packs that followed similar themes: pictures of the venue (including exits and toilets); information about the narrative and characters. There were no comments on the language or colour scheme of the design of such information packs, and how this could impact on the accessibility of

“

...I don't know how those conversations came about or where the information came from with that side of things. It's kind of always been decided that ever since I've been working there but I don't know where the information came from.

P10

“

...making people aware relaxed performance isn't just for young families with neurodiverse children...

P3

“

... it's not just about the sensory things, it's about making people feel comfortable actually even getting through the door in the first place...

P10

the information. It also became clear that the department responsible for creating these packs varied from venue to venue. Whilst sharing the responsibility across departments has potential benefits by diversifying the input, it also raises the question of who is driving and overseeing the process.

“...learning and engagement write it having seen the performance...

P11

“...ours tends to be a bit of a cut and paste I have to say. A lot of the photographs have been the same for quite a few years...

P11

“...where I have experienced that sort of awkwardness because I don't think in some venues the people involved had not been given enough tools to handle the situation correctly...

P1

“That if the audience are finding the live performance too overwhelming they can go into a separate space and watch it on a screen...

P11

“...marketing department in consultation with Front of House and production...we used to send it off to NAS - they would look at it and come back to us...we now pass it over for comment- we don't need specific training on it now...

P9

Discussion of Challenges in Programming and Cost

The bulk of our focus groups were spent discussing barriers venues/companies face in programming/creating RPs from the venue/organisation's perspective, with at least 80% of those present sharing the same concerns. These concerns can be grouped into three distinct areas:

1. Cost

2. Receiving Houses and Touring

3. Audience Development and Continuity

Cost

Cost as a barrier, was a continuous theme with concerns including but not limited to:

- ticket price, in relation to profit made on the show;
- ticket price, in relation to someone attending with a carer/parent/guardian;
- cost of training, particularly for front of house staff;
- cost of a salaried inclusion and access role;
- cost of providing appropriate and quality sensory pack provisions.

Discussion around ticket prices was a relatively constant topic of all three focus groups. Some venues tried lowering the price of the RP tickets to encourage people to attend but discovered that it was sending the wrong message. The show was perceived to be changed to such a degree that it was viewed as having less value as a creative product than the non-Relaxed version. It was felt that the perception of the Relaxed version being 'lesser' in some way impacted on an audience's desire to attend and the performer's attitude towards that specific performance.

From this feedback we can infer that rather than enticing audiences in with bargain prices, this approach instead reduced confidence in the product and took agency away from disabled audiences. Another unintended consequence was that large groups of children were being booked in due to the reduced ticket price. Unconsciously but inevitably

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this would change the environment provided by the theatre, often away from the atmosphere that would be anticipated by audiences of RP. A related but different approach, preferred by many disabled people, is to highlight how an RP is different, without using language such as “reduced, less or lower”.

The latter part of the discussion brought up an important and thought-provoking question with regards to the “normality” of a stereotypical theatre performance; If the environment of “normal” live theatre is not conducive to several groups of people (neurodiverse, groups of children and young people, disabled audiences), is it serving the purpose of the audience?

Where productions were subsidised by charities/foundations/ government schemes, venues were able to assign more resources into reaching new audiences and providing appropriate adjustments to remove barriers. This benefitted disabled audiences, and low-income households more generally. Removing the cost risk for venues allowed them to take the time to reach communities which previously would not have been able to attend live theatre.

P9 also shared that due to additional subsidy, additional time and staffing was allocated to a more thorough evaluation process. It was highlighted that actions like that are not usually possible, due to all venues still recovering financially from the impacts of the Covid-19 lockdowns.

There was a very positive, focus group wide agreement towards having someone who’s main role is developing and executing access performances within each venue. Unfortunately, very few currently

have such a position or are in a financial position to create such a role. The work-load is generally spread relatively thinly across those who understand its importance.

“ ...everybody is under increased pressure. If there’s not help or support or hard cash behind it as well I think it is really difficult for venues to follow through on the intentions that they have...

P9

“ We used a lot of that money to subsidise tickets...to help remove price as a barrier to attendance for certain groups or individuals we could use the funding to top up that discounted price to the full price that seat would normally sell for. It transformed how the work engaged the whole company as it wasn’t viewed as a learning project...

P9

Receiving Houses and Touring

The majority of Scottish theatre venues are receiving houses and a large proportion of the work shown over the year is not created or produced by the hosting venue. One of the key reasons organisations gave for the limited number of RPs being produced, is the length of time a live performance is resident at a venue. Shows performing for three or less days within a venue have very tight margins regarding covering their costs. By making one of those performances relaxed (potentially limiting income generation), is deemed too high a risk.

Another reason stems from the lack of knowledge of how to effectively deliver this type of performance. Many of our participating venues did not feel properly equipped to support or promote an RP with such a short technical rehearsal period, the common perception being the show will need to be altered technically rather than the venue itself being the key factor. Our participants highlighted that unless touring companies come with a pre-programmed RP, they do not have the knowledge/understanding to facilitate one.

“

...we know we should be doing it more. Written into our mission statement and part of our RFO qualifications is that we will integrate BSL and we will do that for at least two performances... but we have no statement about relaxed performances, we'd like to do it when/if we can and when visiting companies come and say we'd like to do a relaxed performance we kinda go oh... we don't push it as much as the other stuff and it comes from a place of not knowing enough about it to do it...

P1

“

...with the whole thing about timings, it's only really our shows that have a prolonged period of time. A lot of the shows that are out there touring are coming for maybe three days...so trying to segregate it for specific people is really problematic from a programming point of view...

P5

Conversations with designers about adapting the lighting and set would have to be pre-approved and programmed to ensure the integrity of the design is not lost. Although some organisations do have targets around accessible performances, the lack of knowledge (and confidence) about RPs, mean that other types of access are prioritised.

The types of performance most commonly receiving an RP are pantomimes and Christmas shows, with almost all of our participating venues programming at least one over the festive period. One reason for this is that these shows usually have longer runs (up to six weeks) making it easier to plan and rehearse for an RP - even receiving houses often produce their Christmas show in house. Compared to shows with shorter runs, producing an RP for a show with a longer run presents considerably less risk regarding income generation. Another reason is that these shows are created for "all the family", with the traditional theatre etiquette of silence and stillness suspended to allow for large groups of children to attend. It was also noted

“
...our panto is the only thing we produce in house. So, we work with a panto production company...panto is the one thing we have a bit more input into...

P6

that these shows (pantomimes especially) are expected to be "less conventional", implying there is more opportunity for building in accessibility.

Audience Development, Continuity and Consistency

Audience development was a key concern for all participants, with the thinking in this area being divided into two distinct considerations: audience development is undermined by audiences not knowing what an RP is and/or being confused by inconsistencies in programming; how best to continue and progress relationships with audiences once they have been engaged (usually through creative learning). Several participants suggested that "fear of getting it wrong" contributed to why organisations had limited engagement with neurodivergent audiences, suggesting that more training, extending beyond front of house teams, is required. Several participants identified that not engaging neurodivergent audiences was potentially more damaging than trying to foster relationships and making some mistakes. The costs and resources associated with developing meaningful relationships with neurodivergent audiences were also mentioned as a barrier preventing organisations from moving forward with their targets regarding this.

Inconsistencies within what is offered by RPs was believed to be a reason behind why relationships between organisations and neurodivergent audiences are hard to foster. The ambiguity leads to feelings of uncertainty - with neurodivergent audiences and organisations. The need for clear guidance was extremely prominent and discussion of a charter system was met with overwhelmingly positive reactions. No such charter system for Relaxed performances currently exists but in theory, it would be a nationally recognised

grading process where, if a Relaxed performance could demonstrate that it met an established set of access criteria, it could market itself as meeting the charter system's standard for access. A system like this would be a useful way for audiences to understand if, or how, a performance will be accessible to them, prior to them purchasing tickets. It was felt having something to work towards would give venue wide investment in the development of RPs rather than it falling to one person or enthusiastic department.

“ ...that gave us a push to be a bit braver and accept sometimes we are gonna upset people and sometimes those people who are going to get upset are our traditional theatre going audience and actually we kinda need to move past that now...

P6

“ ...it makes it more achievable...if it's on a list it's more likely to be done...

P1

“ ...yes, the boundaries and infrastructure would be interesting...we need CEO's, we need a member of the board doing that training...I'm totally on board...but I don't know how I'm getting my CEO there. It does need to be a buy-in from the top to the bottom because I think it could be brilliant.”

P12

Research Conclusions

Audience Findings

- Neurodivergent audiences - current and potential - are not necessarily aware of, or knowledgeable about, RP or the fact that RPs are aimed, designed for and marketed, at them
- There is an assumption among neurodivergent audiences (and more generally) that RPs tend to be aimed at neurodivergent or learning-disabled children, parents with babies, and/or learning disabled families only
- Performance venues can be sensorily overwhelming and stressful spaces for neurodivergent and learning-disabled audience members before the actual RP is considered
- Transition and navigation points (such as clear signage, friendly FoH members/greeters, and demarcated zones within the venue to enable audiences to avoid crowds) are of particular importance to the overall experience of neurodivergent and learning-disabled audiences, and lack of these points represent a significant enough barrier to prohibit attendance
- Noise is a dual issue both in the experience of it and/or the need to produce it
 - Noise from/within venues as well as during performances can be overwhelming for neurodivergent audiences, indicating the need for venues to both consider noise and support neurodivergent audiences by setting up break-out rooms
 - Equally, venues must also consider that neurodivergent audiences require spaces and performances in which they have the agency to make noise themselves when needed

-
- With regards to experiencing productions, following and understanding content and context is key to overall experience - sensory experience and exposure is only one element and not relevant for everyone

- Attitudinal reception and the behaviour of staff is, and remains, fundamental to attendance and the overall experience.

Industry Findings

- There is great passion and buy-in from industry staff to undertake this work and get it right.
- There is discrepancy among the industry's knowledge around RP, which is currently based on inherited or anecdotal practice and understanding. Greater knowledge development and exchange is required regarding (i) what RP is; (ii) who RPs are for; (iii) why RP is important; (iv) how to go about making RPs; (v) the demographic data of neurodivergent audiences; (vi) the work of other venues/ companies offering RP; (vii) the benefits of RP (regarding both audience access and the inclusivity agendas and policy of the industry)
- Knowledge (of the above) built through training may be undermined by a lack of arts specific expertise in that

training and lack of understanding of the full range of non-neuronormative experiences.

- There is a focus on productions being adapted rather than the venue and experience round the performance when both have impact.
 - Production adaptation is generally inconsistent and often out of the control of the venue.
 - The venue environment which is in full purview of staff could be developed more thoroughly to create a more consistent audience experience.

-
- Staff capacity to enact work and policy is often prohibited by real and perceived barriers.
 - Cost (of ticket price for RPs; training staff; funding salaried inclusion and access roles; and providing sensory pack provisions).
 - Resources (venues feeling ill-equipped to support or promote RPs with short technical rehearsal periods; lack of training and/or in-house knowledge of making RPs; and costs associated with developing meaningful relationships with neurodivergent audiences).
 - Managerial buy-in (from top to bottom so that Chief Executives, Artistic Directors and Board members train alongside front of house staff; enshrining targets in organisational goals and/or mission statements).
 - Much practice and activity is not systematically tested or evaluated unless project funded. This impacts on embedding organisational knowledge and in transference through changing staffing.
 - There is a general uplift in better practice where activity is specifically funded due to accountability and reporting to funders.

Conclusion

All industry participants involved in our focus groups demonstrated a willingness and desire to develop RPs within their organisations. However, our research indicates that a lack of appropriate resourcing within organisations, compounded with a lack of the relevant knowledge (and the retention of this) and limited training options, are the consistent factors in prohibiting the growth of RPs and their supporting services, within Scotland.

Programming and/ or producing RPs is a positive first step, but it is only one step in a multi-step process. To increase engagement in RPs, organisations need to implement the other strategies for removing barriers that work in parallel to the RP itself, as have been outlined in this report. It is also essential to build mechanisms for feedback and to nurture a degree of positive accountability, such as we see being a driver in initiatives that are project funded.

These procedures then need to be clearly communicated to the audience:

- what is the event;
- who it is for;
- what can an audience expect;
- how are barriers being removed;
- an assurance that the organisation has dedicated expertise and resources into effectively implementing it.

By providing a more consistent environment and experience around the inconsistent and varied experience of RPs, organisations will be in a better position to build relationships and develop trust with audiences for RPs.

HOUSE LIGHTS UP!

.....

Act Three

Rewriting the Script

A photograph of Jess Mabel Jones and Jess Thom joyfully holding hands and jumping. They are stood in the centre of a circular raised stage at TouretteShero's event at Tate exchange. Children are gathered around the stage seated on the floor. Bubbles fill the air. A BSL interpreter stands to the left interpreting Jess and Jess's performance.

Image by James Lyndsay



Changing the Landscape

What is the Vision?

Due to the current lack of consistent practice of RP to date, we need to collectively work toward a vision of RP provision in Scotland that expands on what access is, offers variety, and builds the capacity of venues to understand, deliver and communicate offers. To this end, we have defined 4 key visions.

1

A nuanced and evolving understanding of RP.

- The sharing of awareness and knowledge, informed by research and lived experience, of what RPs and spaces can and should be.
- Using this knowledge to work towards an 'inclusive approach'¹ - bringing together both mainstream and targeted audiences for an RP composed of disabled and non-disabled, neurodivergent and neurotypical people in the audience together.
- Using this knowledge to underpin the development of RP best practice, tailored to your specific venue(s), as you embed a unique relaxed approach that meets the needs of your organisation and audiences.
- Understanding that this is a live issue, and will require keeping abreast of contemporary understandings of RP, and being reactive to any developments in thinking.

¹ Ciné-ma Différence, 2020: 19

2 Policies and procedures that concern neurodivergent people are created in consultation with neurodivergent people.

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- Establishing ways to dialogue and engage with the neurodivergent people local to venues.
 - Fostering and supporting neurodivergent leadership within your organisation.
 - Considering ways your organisation can work with more neurodivergent people, whether freelance or salaried, understandings of RP, and being reactive to any developments in thinking.

3 Audiences are easily able to understand how your organisation defines a relaxed environment, and to discover details of how individual performances are being relaxed.

-
- Giving clarity on how your organisation defines a relaxed environment, and information specific to individual performances in your venue.
 - Through direct communication and publicly available information.
 - Consider accessible ways to share this information.
 - Communicating internally about why measures have been or will be introduced, so that all staff are aware of any changes to the organisation, and why they have been made.
 - Especially front facing roles, who may have interactions with neurodivergent audiences.

4

Your spaces feel welcoming,
and your events feel accessible
and inclusive.

- Understanding that diversity and inclusion cannot use a one size fits all approach.
- You can work to offer as consistent an experience as possible at your venue but there is only so much of the environment that can be controlled or altered
- The elements of live performance which are enjoyed, and the barriers experienced, vary greatly.
- Accepting that not every performance can be made accessible in the same way so there should be a variety of accessible experiences for audiences.

A photograph of audience members smiling and watching Touretteshero's Festival of Rest & Resistance in the Grand Hall of Battersea Arts Centre.
Image by Kevin Moran



What can you do now?

We have developed four core recommendations to provide guidance and support to organisations and companies wishing to examine their current ways of working. These recommendations are designed to inform the measures that could be taken, and are practical in nature. Each recommendation has suggested actions that could help an aim be achieved - these suggested actions are not an exhaustive list. We recommend that anybody seeking to improve their offer to Neurodivergent audiences considers the specifics of their situation to identify whether our suggested actions are suitable, or whether alternative actions would be more appropriate.

The actions we have suggested have been graded into different levels (A, B, C) with A graded actions requiring the least amount of capacity and resource to be achieved, and C graded actions requiring the most

amount of capacity and resource to be achieved. We have graded the actions like this so these recommendations can be used by organisations and companies of varying sizes - but we strongly recommend that companies are ambitious in approaching these actions and really push themselves to achieve the higher level actions if it can be reasonably viewed that they have capacity and resources to do so. Again, this is **not an exhaustive list**. In fact, we see this list of recommendations as the beginning of a process, and it is our hope that if/ when a company achieves each of the actions outlined below, they undertake further planning to establish deeper and more impactful actions.

1. Engage in the Wider Conversation

The first step in developing work in this area is to engage with the current wider conversation, understanding what learning and knowledge has already been developed around RPs. It is important that we find ways to speak to each other as a sector and find out what is happening because, as we have evidenced, there is currently no continuity.

A	B	C
<p>Read and research. Connect to those in networks who work in this field and pay attention to what is developing.</p> <p>Organisations working in this area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Battersea Arts Centre / bac.org.uk • Touretteshero / www.touretteshero.com • Ramps on the Moon www.rampsonthemoon.co.uk <p>Useful reading (links available in the bibliography)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ciné-ma différence: Relaxed Performances Study • British Council Canada: Relaxed Performance: Exploring Accessibility In The Canadian Theatre Landscape • Touretteshero: Relaxed Performances - The FAQs 	<p>Talk to staff, stakeholders, audiences and wider industry to share what you have learned, and invite them to feedback in relevant ways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for opportunities to add RPs to the agenda of meetings. • Communicate learning and ambitions to your stakeholders and audience, eg in a newsletter. • Support sector focussed events where your learning can be shared and replicated. 	<p>Put resources and capacity into actioning learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can a staff member attend a working group or network? • Can you support R&D in your organisation? • Can you support people to become Access / Relaxed Consultants?

2. Speak to Audiences

From our research, it is clear that venues could have a better understanding of who their current audiences for RPs are, and who their potential audience could include. Because of this gap, there is uncertainty about whether current provisions for audiences are suitable. The audience themselves are the experts here, so find ways to communicate directly with them.

A	B	C
<p>Collect feedback at performances and talk to people you already reach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Consider a range of ways to collect that feedback, to be as accessible as possible	<p>Dedicate time to deeper conversations - maybe a focus group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">This should be facilitated by someone who has done the research and understands what the offer of RPs could beConsider access of neurodivergent people within the discussion space	<p>Think about who is not there, who you are not connected to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Consider an advisory panel or a partnership with a local school or organisation - ensure it is actionableIf people are giving their time for free, how can this be offset? Is it appropriate to ask people to give their time for free if you are using their skill and insight?

3. Examine Your Environment

Our research has identified that for many neurodivergent audiences, their experience within a venue or event space, is just as important - if not more important - than their experience of the event itself. This means that the environment of the venue or event space needs to have any potential barriers removed, whether that is reducing or removing some elements (such as high levels of sensory information) or introducing new elements (such as a dedicated break-out space).

A	B	C
<p>Conduct an access audit of your current environment and processes to identify where the barriers are - involve neurodivergent people in this process to ensure you can identify barriers as fully as possible</p> <p>Things to consider (but are not limited to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make information shared through your website and communications easy to find.• Include clear information about access and what it entails, and make it easy to find.• Utilise visuals, video and audio in how you share information.• Provide easy-read versions of essential information. Provide a line of further or alternative access-specific communication, i.e. phone or email• Ensure all information is accurate and up to date, i.e. visual stories, venue access information.• Provide clear and plentiful signage around the venue, so audiences can navigate your space easily.• Extend a warm, inviting and inclusive tone to make audiences feel welcome, considered and more safe.	<p>Identify actions from the access audit and create a plan for how and when you can remove any existing barriers - you won't be able to do it all at once.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Removing some barriers might require financial resources, removing other barriers might be free or affordable: don't limit yourself to only making changes that are affordable, be led by the priorities of your audiences.• Communicate your plan internally and externally so people understand the aims you are working towards, and the steps you are taking to achieve them.• The removal of some barriers might be permanent fixtures of the event space. Other barriers might be removed only for RPs.	<p>Take a strategic approach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go beyond responding to the barriers identified in the audit of your current environment - think into the longer term.• Ensure that any future developments design in access considerations from the outset.• Empower the right people to be part of planning and decision making.

4. Examine Your Cultures

As our research has indicated, it is not enough for an organisation to introduce RPs and remove barriers to access - the diversity that is desired from audience demographics should also be reflected within the culture of the organisation. This is because neurodivergent people are the best advocates for the steps that should be taken to make them feel included. This representation can happen at all levels within an organisation; from the board, to staff, to voluntary community advisory groups. If the current working culture does not allow for a Relaxed environment within it, then it is prioritising neuronormativity and excluding neurodiversity.

A

Reflect upon and audit the organisational team and practices - what are the current cultures within the organisation?

- If a neurodivergent person comes into your event space, in what ways are they made to feel welcome?
 - Can you create and share public facing (accessible) documents about your commitment to being more accessible?
 - Can you create materials and/or content that introduces and welcomes audiences to your building?
 - Can you work with/ programme more work by neurodivergent artists?
 - Can you incorporate RPs into the main strand of your venue's work (beyond children's shows or Christmas shows)?
- Bring in people with expertise and lived experience to feed into this process, if that is missing from your organisation.
- Consider whether your organisation could undertake any training - front facing staff and senior management

B

Audit the impact of your current cultures

- Consider how the internal culture of your organisation impacts on your work and external perceptions, especially your programming.
- Where there are impacts identify mitigations or changes to policy and practice.
- Identify the ambitions you have in this area of work.

C

Planning to change your cultures.

- Develop a plan to address the shift you need to make
- Formalise your accountability. Enshrine and publicise the ambitions you are working towards.
- Embed your progress in organisational strategy, such as business planning documents, annual reviews and presentations to the board - make the process core to your work, not an add on.
- Communicate your ambitions and commitments to your stakeholders and audiences.
- If your current frameworks are not reflective of A & B, do that work before you formalise anything, for example in a constitution.

HOUSE LIGHTS UP!

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Epilogue

Reviews & References



A photograph of two facilitators standing around a round table with scientific paraphernalia at Touretteshero's event Brewing in Battersea at Battersea Arts Centre. Children are gathered around the table.
Image by Kevin Moran.

A Neurodivergent View



Jonathan Carlton is an autistic autism access consultant. He has worked with Celtic Football Club, supporting them to become more accessible to autistic fans. He also works with Birds of Paradise as a Youth Arts Consultant, and has done reviews of Relaxed performances in Scotland, including Disney's The Lion King.

As part of our process of analysing our research findings, we asked Jonathan to review the What Can You Do Now section. We did this because:

As an autistic audience member, he has direct lived experience of attending events that are not accessible to him.

As an autistic access consultant, he has knowledge and insights into understanding where barriers exist and how they could be mitigated.

Following the Nothing About Us Without Us mantra, we wanted this research to have additional input from a neurodivergent perspective, to ensure the conclusions we have reached as a research team, are seen as useful by the people for whom they are intended.

We asked Jonathan to focus on the What Can You Do Now section, because it is the section of the report intended to galvanise action within the industry into making positive changes, and as such is the section which will have the most influence on the sector moving forward.

What follows below is an excerpt from a conversation that was held between Jonathan and Callum Madge (BOP), after reading through the What Can You Do Now section of the report.

“

I think you have covered a lot. This will be very useful I think, what you've conducted so far.

The objective seems to be to really build an accessible culture within each organisation, into the DNA and the heart of that organisation, from board level down to the whole team and structure. You have covered the idea that everyone in the venue is aware of the situation, so instead of just saying "It's a relaxed performance, it's the responsibility of whoever is doing it, we are just a venue", it's actually including everybody, and it all moves as one. It's in business documents, it's everything. That's really cool.

It's important because the patrons attending want to experience both the venue, and all of the excellence that comes with that, but they also want to experience that in line with accessibility. So the show might be really accessible but the venue might fall short of their expectations. With this kind of approach everyone is working together. And that's really cool.

There is a strong emphasis on speaking with people with lived experience and I think that's

really really important. It's a crucial part of this project. The more that we speak about that to venues and organisations, that they must speak to people with lived experience and bring them in and let them advise them or support them, we really need to push that, big time. That's really really good.

By having different levels of support that can be implemented, it actually gives a lot of opportunity to each venue. So you can have a venue that's on a very tight budget, is very very small, they can start on the first tier, and they can do amazing things with that. But they could have the ambition to go to the top tier, in time. And then you could be an organisation that goes for the top tier. It's about acknowledging that every venue is different, some are Victorian, some are very accessible, modern venues, some could be in the process of being refurbished. So it's covering everything, which is amazing.

Useful Links and Resources

Support in making your organisation more accessible

Access Audits: Birds of Paradise's Youth Arts Consultants

<https://www.boptheatre.co.uk/yacs>

Access London Theatre: Your Guide to Putting on an Assisted Performance

<https://www.familyarts.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ALT-Guide-to-Putting-on-an-Assisted-Performance-2.pdf>

A Noise Within: Relaxed Performance Guide

<https://youtu.be/Uep9fWypY9o>

British Council: Relaxed Performances Training for Arts Presenters

https://www.britishcouncil.us/sites/default/files/relaxed_performances_4_page_overview_menu.pdf

Crippling the Arts: Access Guide

<http://tangledarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cta-access-guide-spreads-digital.pdf>

Touretteshero: Principles of Relaxed Performance

<https://www.touretteshero.com/2016/03/16/relaxed-performances-the-faqs>

Pleasance: The Smeds and The Smoos: A Visual Guide

<https://www.pleasance.co.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Smeds%20and%20The%20Smoos%20Relaxed%20Performance%20Information%20Pack.pdf>

Organisations in Scotland supporting Neurodivergent People

Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh

<https://amase.org.uk>

Autism Rights Group Highlands

<https://www.arghighland.co.uk>

Capability Scotland

<https://www.capability.scot>

Disability Equality Scotland

<https://disabilityequality.scot>

Inclusion Scotland

<http://inclusionscotland.org>

National Autistic Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk>

Number 6

<https://www.number6.org.uk>

Scottish Neurodiverse Performance Network

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/616030068869160>

Scottish Women's Autistic Network

<https://swanscotland.org/>

Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics

<https://m.facebook.com/100083244763300>

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BIRDS OF PARADISE
THEATRE COMPANY



Access Scottish Theatre

Cover Image: A photograph of a young person looking down and smiling at Brewing in the Basement the moment a confetti cannon has gone off.

Image by James Lyndsay.

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