

**Enlarging the Place: Adapting the Community Theatre Rehearsal Process for Elderly
Persons, Persons with Mobility Impairment, and Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

by

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Abstract

Every civilization on the planet has some form of theatre. Musical theatre is primarily an American art form. It can be enjoyed by everyone. Enjoyment of any art form is increased by knowledge of and participation in the field and amateur productions allow non-professionals to take part in this collaborative activity. All ages and abilities can participate at various levels, from the smallest child to the wheelchair bound adult. It is my firm belief that taking part in a community theatre production is a creative and worthwhile way to express oneself, foster friendships, develop talents, and perpetuate this uniquely American art form.

I researched methods of adapting the musical theatre rehearsal process for different groups of amateurs. Among these groups I focused on the needs of elderly persons, persons with mobility impairment, and persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

It is my wish to best adapt traditional rehearsal techniques to suit these and other groups. By seeking out the basic problems for working with specialized groups and by finding workable solutions for each, we will thereby better enable ourselves to work with all of them.

I outlined the general rehearsal process and made practical suggestions for working with and encouraging participation by these groups. In producing their best work, the participants foster a sense of community and strengthen their areas of weakness.

Introduction

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wires
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got now.¹

Every civilization on the planet has some form of theatre. Musical theatre is primarily an American art form. It can be enjoyed by everyone. Enjoyment of any art form is increased by knowledge of and participation in the field, and amateur productions allow non-professionals to take part in this collaborative activity. All ages and abilities can participate at various levels, from the youngest child to the oldest adult. It is my firm belief that taking part in a community theatre production is a creative and worthwhile way to express oneself, foster friendships, develop talents, and perpetuate this uniquely American form.

The purpose of this research is to identify ways in which the musical theatre rehearsal process can be adapted for special populations of amateurs. Among these groups, my focus is on elderly persons, persons with impaired mobility, and persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I have chosen to focus on these special populations because of my personal experience and interest in working with them. I have sung and played music for over fifty years and have enjoyed acting for almost as long. I have directed numerous choirs and musical productions, including those done by elderly persons and those done by students who have special learning needs. Since becoming mobility impaired several decades ago, I have developed a keen eye for hindrances to physical venues. The numerous community theatre groups I have been involved with over the years brought me into contact with people with a wide range of ages and abilities.

¹ Staines, Bill. "A Place in the Choir." song lyric, BMG Rights Management US, LLC.

One size does not fit all, but one size can be adapted to the varying needs of these various groups. Many of the adaptations that enable one group to partake of the theatre experience also will enable the other two. By seeking out the basic problems and by finding workable solutions for each, I have developed ways for community theatre groups to best adapt traditional rehearsal techniques.

Before beginning the attempt to include elderly people, people with mobility impairment, and people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, one must first be prepared to answer the question “is this process intended to be therapy or theatre?” The answer to that question will determine both the details of the process and the quality of the final outcome. In this paper I answered the question simply. The process I am addressing is “theatre”, with the expectation of enabling the highest quality performance a group can give. (For more information on the topic of theatre as therapy see: Booker, Carleton, Corbett, Hartigan, Hess, Karafistan, Loer, Polloway, Price, Schneider, and Worley as referenced in **Works Consulted**.)

I do not attempt to “treat” any one, but rather to bring to attention some of the challenges that may be faced by these people groups and to offer suggestions and solutions for easing the way towards including them in a community theatre musical production. I outline the general rehearsal process and make practical suggestions for working with and encouraging these special populations. My goal is to ensure the participants can do their best work, thereby experiencing a sense of community and strength in the performing arts.

Throughout this paper I have used the terms “theatre” to refer to the art form and “theater” to refer to the building where a production is presented. “Able-bodied/able-minded” is a broad term preferred in some of the research, while “d/Deaf” includes both those persons who do not and those who do use sign language and identify as part of Deaf culture. Finally, I have

chosen to use the format “person with (descriptor)” or “people with (descriptors)”. I am aware that this format is offensive to some in the disability community who prefer the format “(descriptor) person”. No offense is intended.

Historical Context

Theatre is universal and timeless.² Every civilization has its form. Why is this so? We are all born mimics.³ Infants unlock language and social cues by imitating the adults around them. What is it about community theatre that draws us in and compels us? We are social beings and we all have stories to share. People have used drama and music to tell stories since earliest man. Artwork on cave walls attests to man’s desire to share his story with others. Sharing the tale of a hunt or a long journey, passing down history in story and ballad, ritual dancing and recreational dance; all are forms of storytelling.

Millennia before the first modern musical reached Broadway in the first part of the Twentieth Century, community members of ancient Greek city-states were producing amateur dramas. In medieval Europe, the Church conducted participatory living dramas in the form of Biblical pageants, while trade guilds and various communities used any excuse to put on their

² Brown, Kevin. "The Top Ten Reasons Why Theatre Is Still Important in the Twenty-First Century." *TCG Circle*, Theatre Communications Group, 2014.

<http://www.tcgcircle.org/2014/06/the-top-ten-reasons-why-theatre-is-still-important-in-the-twenty-first-century/>.

³ Neil, C. Lang. *Amateur Theatricals: A Practical Guide*. C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., 1904.

own productions with themes such as “brotherhood” of “neighborliness.”⁴ It is recorded that in 1607, English sailors on a becalmed ship staged a performance of one of Shakespeare’s plays to pass the time and lift their spirits.⁵ Amateur entertainment in America began almost with America herself. By 1702 there were amateur productions in the colony of Virginia.⁶ Such productions by self-chosen “social groups of common interest”⁷ continued to thrive throughout the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. In the Nineteenth Century private “parlor theatricals” were encouraged for showcasing one’s children –training them in comportment and elocution – and introducing them to society.⁸

Theatre was available in rural and developing areas where there was no other entertainment. It was a community endeavor outside of sports and did not require ownership of musical instruments for playing in an orchestra or band. It was not a solitary art like writing or painting and required less specialized training than dance performance.⁹ Also called “art theatre”,

⁴ Burleigh, Louise. *The Community Theatre in Theory and Practice*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1917.

⁵ Dobson, Michael. *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁶ Rankin, Hugh F. *The Theater in Colonial America*. University of North Carolina, 1960.

⁷ Burleigh, Louise. *The Community Theatre in Theory and Practice*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1917.

⁸ Hawley, Judith and Mary Isbell. "Amateur Theatre in the Long Nineteenth Century." *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2011, pp. xvii-xix.

⁹ Young, John Wray. *The Community Theatre and How It Works*. Harper & Bros., 1957.

“little theatre”, “amateur theatre”, “tributary theatre” and “home theatricals”; the term “community theatre” was coined by Louise Burleigh in 1917 and is the preferred usage in America today.¹⁰

Several things contributed to the continued growth in popularity of community theatre including the fact that multiple generations could be on stage together. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century this popularity was further boosted by the early 1900’s Arts and Crafts movement of participatory hobbies and an influx of immigrants with its own theatre-going culture.¹¹ Additionally, the fact that theatre was now being taught in universities meant that there were increasing numbers of graduates who wanted to continue their involvement in the art.

With the rise in popularity of Broadway shows and the availability of them for amateur productions, there occurred a concomitant rise in community theatre involvement. People who otherwise spent their days in non-artistic realms were able to become for some brief time actors, singers, dancers, and musicians. Theatre was recreation, not merely for spectators but also for all those who wished to be active participants. Similar to athletic endeavors, theatrical productions provided an opportunity to bond with others who shared one’s interests and who wished to play – for the most part regardless of their skill level. That is, it was possible for almost everyone. Three special populations have until recently been actively excluded or simply omitted from consideration: elderly persons, persons with physically disabilities, and persons with Autism

¹⁰ Lynch, Twink. "History of Community Theatre in America." *From the Top*.

<https://www.aact.org/community-theatre-history>, 2017.

¹¹ Chansky, Dorothy. *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*. Southern Illinois University, 2004.

Spectrum Disorder. In this paper I identify ways that the musical theatre rehearsal process can be adapted for these specific populations and outline the many benefits which accrue to all those involved owing to this inclusion.

Benefits for Community Theatre for Communities and Participants

Humans are the only species that create theatre. According to the United Nations,¹² theatre is a human right. What are the benefits to all involved that make this so? In a 2017 article, Dr. Kevin Brown listed ten reasons why theatre is still important in the Twenty-First Century.¹³ These reasons include the fact that theatre teaches us about ourselves, teaches us how to express ourselves, and helps us to develop our innate creativity.

Man is a storyteller, born with a need and desire to communicate. Whether sacred, secular, comedic, dramatic, spoken, sung, written, danced, drawn, painted, or sculpted all stories spring from our need to share with others. We have to communicate. We have to make others feel something we have felt; to move them, to come into their world and to draw them into ours. We have to touch the heart of another.

¹² United Nations. "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities." 2006.

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>.

¹³ Brown, Kevin. "The Top Ten Reasons Why Theatre Is Still Important in the Twenty-First Century." *TCG Circle*, Theatre Communications Group, 2014.

<http://www.tgcircle.org/2014/06/the-top-ten-reasons-why-theatre-is-still-important-in-the-twenty-first-century/>.

There are multiple benefits for both the audience and the performers in a show. Many of these positive outcomes carry over to the community at large. For those who come together as participants, the benefits are often immediate and noticeable. Coming together as volunteers, people find a group of like-minded individuals. This common interest can span many of the divides that would otherwise keep people at arm's length from each other in society: age, race, education, socio-economic strata, even physical ability.

Community theatre is a place to form new friendships and to strengthen existing ones; therefore it is a place to socialize and work on interpersonal skills. Theatre provides the chance for a positive shared experience resulting in a sense of camaraderie. This camaraderie, this sense of "communitas",¹⁴ extends beyond the stage to the audience members and beyond. The shared emotional experience of live theatre is unique in the performing arts.

Community theatre productions are indeed a training ground for artistic, expressive and technical skills. More than that, a theatre performance is a training ground for emotions, not only for the actors and the crew, but also for the audience.¹⁵ Theatre is a place for actor and audience alike to learn and practice empathy safely. No one's feelings, on stage or off, will change the outcome of the show.¹⁶ Whether they are a spectator in the darkened seats or a participant on the brightly lit stage, each person may allow himself to experience emotions they might try to

¹⁴ Kuftinec, Sonja. "A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre." *Theatre Topics*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1996.

¹⁵ Pullman, Anna. "The Crucial Role of Community Theatre." *Maryland Theatre Guide*, 2012.

¹⁶ Kinney-Petrucha, Maia. "'The Play's the Thing': Is Theatre Our Ideal Empathy Workout?"

HowlRound, 2017.

suppress in everyday life. Although it may be subtle, this personal experience of loving, hating, feeling sorry for or rooting for one's heroes and heroines gives one's soul a workout. The limits and boundaries of one's understanding of and care for another are expanded without personal risk. No one else ever need know what one person feels and thinks as they sit in the dark and watch the story unfold. Greater empathy for other humans can only be beneficial to the world at large. When group vocal music is added to spoken dialog, the power of the singing chorus reaches a person in a way no other art form does or can. The choral ensemble becomes a character in its own right and interacts with the viewers in the seats as well as with the individual actors on the stage.

Finally, beyond the immediate and interpersonal upsides to live performance, there is one benefit left to consider. In our media-saturated society, an educated audience—one which has had a positive experience at a live performance—is an audience more likely to attend other live cultural events. Persons who have enjoyed a local musical theatre production may then decide to attend a performance by another troupe, a touring company, a concert, or a symphony. According to Jennifer Ashley Tepper,¹⁷ musical theatre is in resurgence due to crossovers between television, film, and stage. All efforts—all positive presentations—grow the fan base for all others.

Although performing solo is available to almost everyone at all times, being part of a group work (whether it be music, dance, or any other collaborative effort) requires something

¹⁷ Tepper, Jennifer Ashley. "Are We Living in a New Golden Age of Musical Theatre?" *Playbill*, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/are-we-living-in-a-new-golden-age-of-musical-theatre>.

more from each individual as far as the need for interpersonal engagement, the exercise of individual patience, and collaborative precision. During the community theatre rehearsal process there is often down time spent waiting while others work through their scenes, songs, and dances. There is no personal choice as to how much rehearsal time is spent working on each aspect of the show. One must work to blend one's voice with others, match one's dance moves with others, and interact believably with others. Yet, given all the necessary compromises, it is a rare and precious opportunity not only to make art but also to build, establish, and strengthen the bonds of community.

Such a production often calls on participants to help out in diverse areas like construction and costuming. It is therefore a place where the same person can be both teacher and student, sharing their expertise in one area and being a willing novice in another as all work together in the many elements required for a successful production. Working on a show can provide a change from one's routine, an opportunity to receive training in different areas, and an outlet for using one's voice in ensemble singing.

Despite the long history of community theatre performances and all the benefits of the same both to those who participate and to those who spectate, there are entire groups of people who have been and who continue to be excluded from participation and even consideration. When a community theatre company has the necessary awareness and planning to welcome these underserved groups into their world, everyone benefits.

We are not solitary beings. We desire and require the company of others. We are social beings. We live in families, communities, societies –we are citizens of towns, cities, regions, countries, continents, and the world. And, we all share a deep-seated basic need to hear and to be heard. This need does not diminish with age or infirmity. It cannot be ignored or dismissed due

to difficulties in making it happen. This need to hear and to be heard is why we do what we do. This is why we make art. This is “why theatre?” And this is exactly why we must continue to find ways to bring the overlooked into the fold. Theatre is - should be, can be, and must be - diverse, inclusive, and possible for all.

Customary Expectations of Participants

Musical theatre productions are, by definition, musical performances. All cast members are expected to be “triple threats”: to sing and dance, as well as to act. There are so many elements that need to come together that there is quite a limited amount of time to be spent on any one of them. Songs, dances, and acting all require time to be mastered and integrated into the whole. Directors, vocal directors, and choreographers must split rehearsal time and focus between them. No one has the luxury of spending the entirety of the time working toward group mastery in one area alone.

The work of a vocal director is to teach a lot of music in a short amount of time. Many people come to the stage with a background in vocal music. They learn new music quickly and lead the rest of their fellow cast members. Often the work of the vocal director involves merely dividing the cast by vocal range, teaching the show’s tunes by rote and hoping for the best. Sometimes the vocal director will make available recordings of each voice part in isolation. Sometimes he/she will merely instruct the cast to listen to a commercial recording of the show and “do your best”. It is assumed that many cast members can read music and play piano well enough to “plunk out” their part on their own. At the very least, it is expected that they can hear music when it is played for them and can read and speak English.

This brings us to a second expectation: that cast members will be able to speak clearly enough to be understood and be able to learn their own dialog lines. Although there are some words, terms, or phrases that may need to be explained, seldom is there the luxury of time available for group script study and discussion. Learning of lines is a solitary endeavor and no teaching about how to memorize or how to act on stage is usually available. The director must direct, rather than serve as an acting coach.

The last part of the triple threat requirements of a member of a cast is the ability to dance, or at least to move in generally the same manner and direction and at the same tempo as everyone else. As with singing, there will be cast members with more talent and training in this area and they will naturally assume a leadership role. However, there is an expectation of some ability and willingness to attempt what is asked of all. The choreographer will demonstrate each dance in small segments, stringing them together as mastery is gained by the majority. From the time a dance is “set”, there is seldom further teaching or review, only repetition. Again, there is an assumption that cast members will be able to remember what they have been shown and to practice on their own time.

One final element of a musical show is the requirement for memorized, repeated execution of material. The cast must remember their music, lyrics, dialog, blocking, and dance moves without benefit of prompting or notes, and they must be able to perform their scenes the same way repeatedly in order to establish a consistent rhythm and flow. The show must have the basics of song, dance, and acting mastered and run according to plan before the next elements (costume changes, live orchestra, set and light changes) are added.

In the next section I point out some difficulties each of the three special populations may have with these basic elements and expectations and offer recommended approaches for mitigating them.

Adaptations for Elderly Persons

We isolate people over the age of sixty in many ways. By assuming that physical debilitation and mental incapacitation automatically accompany aging, we deny older citizens the opportunity to work if they so choose, thus excluding them from the marketplace and political structure which they helped to build. By creating living situations which separate our elders from the rest of society we discourage personal freedom, independence, the confidence to take risks and creativity in our fellow citizens, as well as our elders.¹⁸

Many studies have been done on the benefits of involvement in creative activities for elderly persons. Dr. Gene Cohen in particular has researched in this area for decades. In his work he has documented the positive effects of engaging with the arts on the physical health of senior citizens. "Studies have shown that when older adults experience a sense of control (e.g. a sense of mastery), they demonstrate positive health outcomes."¹⁹ Further findings show that social support and meaningful social engagement enable a boost to the immune system. From research in brain plasticity, we have learned that challenging activities and new experiences enhance

¹⁸ Telander, Marcie; Quinlan, Flora; and Verson, Karol. *Acting Up! An Innovative Approach to Creative Drama for Older Adults*. The Coach House Press, Incorporated, 1982, p. 8.

¹⁹ Cohen, Gene D. "New Theories and Research Findings on the Positive Influence of Music and Art on Health with Ageing." *Arts & Health*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, p. 49.

cognitive function through the formation of new synapses and synchronized, bi-lateral hemisphere involvement.¹⁹

Drama activities require participation that is active and engaged at a high level. Seniors need to engage physically, mentally, and emotionally,²⁰ and in return they reap the benefits of an increase in skills, confidence, social connection, and community spirit. Elderly people often need a reason to make the effort to go out and socialize and to disregard even temporarily the aches, pains, and other limitations of aging. Often they need distraction from personal grief, as well as loss of their mobility and independence. "Old age, unlike other stages in the life cycle, is the first stage of life with systematic status loss."²¹ In theatre elderly persons can be part of a new, self-chosen peer group with a shared interest. Belonging to a group that is special in some way –i.e. performers –confers a certain status to all included. Theatre performance allows elderly persons to be seen as capable individuals when they are often depicted as no longer vital members of society. Rehearsals require them to use and thereby maintain their verbal, physical, and mental abilities. When much or most of life is behind one it is all too easy to spend a majority of one's time looking back and living in the past. Active participation in acting uses one's experiences and memories to enrich performance. The elderly have great storehouses of these resources from which to draw.

²⁰ Bernard, Miriam; Rickett, Michelle; Amigoni, David; Munro, Lucy; Murray, Michael; and Rezzano, Jill. "Ages and Stages: The Place of Theatre in the Lives of Older People." *Ageing & Society*, vol. 35, no. 6, 2014, p. 1122.

²¹ Clark, Patch and Osgood, Nancy J. *Seniors on Stage: The Impact of Applied Theatre Techniques on the Elderly*. Praeger Publishers, 1985, p. 7.

“Elderly people as a group are more frequently the recipients of services than the donors and apparently appreciate the chance to reverse their accustomed role.”²² They can provide entertainment for their audiences, and act as encouragement, inspiration, and role models for other seniors. Finally, when elderly persons are involved in intergenerational endeavors as is the case with community theatre, additional benefits accrue. Increased communication and understanding help to bridge the so-called generation gap. Sharing experiences and passions help to develop new friendships and new positive perceptions of aging for all involved.

On the opposite side of the equation, from the many known benefits of theatre for the elderly, are the many known challenges that stand in their way. More than any other special population, this group is likely to have deficits in multiple areas. The aging process faces us all and brings with it a reduction in our former faculties. Hearing and vision loss are commonplace. Stamina and mobility often are reduced due to skeletal, muscular, and circulatory impairment. Beyond the mere physical changes, personality traits may begin to turn for the worse. An elderly person may feel that they have earned the right to be bossy, cranky, or otherwise unpleasant simply by reason of their longevity. There are fewer peers and elders for them to respect as authority figures to challenge their negative behaviors.

Elderly Persons with Vision Impairment

Low vision or other difficulty in seeing may be the most common problem among older actors. There are many different approaches to address this, each one working best for a different situation. If reading small print is the main problem, a simple solution is to provide large print script to those cast members who require it. Another option, for those who cannot see print at all

²² Gray, Paula Gross. *Dramatics for the Elderly*. Teachers College, 1974, p. 4.

and for those who are aural learners, is to make available an audio recording of the necessary lines and songs. Audio recordings also are very helpful for those whose first language is not the same as the language of the play. Elderly persons who are not literate in the play's tongue may be aided by hearing the words pronounced and repeated.

Blocking for the visually impaired elderly should be simple and safe; placing them in the center and upstage areas so as to keep them away from the edge of the stage where they might be in danger of stepping off. Marking out an actor's blocking with colored tape on the floor may be enough of an accommodation to enable independence of movement. If it is not, or if the scene lighting is too low, an excellent way to manage their blocking and to aid integration into the cast is to assign a willing cast member as a "blocking buddy". The blocking buddy is tasked with steering and assisting the vision-impaired actor to their place on stage and to help them enter and exit safely. Designating the paired actors as a specific character grouping (family members, old friends, etc.) gives them reason to remain together throughout the show. An added benefit of using blocking buddies is that it can easily help enable actors to find a backstory to flesh out their characters. Since the actors will be spending their time together, they will have opportunity to get to know each other socially and to brainstorm character details together.

Lastly, if the stage lighting is too bright for an actor's comfort, making that or sunglasses part of their costume can help. Elderly actors simply may need to be reminded to wear their glasses, making them part of their costume and character as well.

Elderly Persons with Hearing Impairment

In a medium such as theatre that relies so heavily on interaction, hearing and being heard is of paramount importance. Communication must go both ways and requires understanding and

being understood. With the possible exception of all-Deaf, d/Deaf, and mixed d/Deaf/hearing troupes and audiences, most such communication is spoken and heard. The challenges inherent for the hearing-impaired elderly must be addressed in order to allow for their active participation in the performing arts.

If the actor possesses sufficient hearing to allow them to participate in choral singing, all that may be necessary is some added coaching and reminders to watch the conductor. Placing the person near a speaker, a loud melodic instrument, or a strong vocalist can help them to find and retain the correct pitch and tempo. The “buddy system” can certainly be employed here as it is for blocking; pair the actor with a willing and reliable cast member who can help cue them. A simple touch on the arm or gentle nudge can alert the hearing-impaired actor to musical entrances and cut offs.

Reminding the hearing-impaired actor to face the conductor and the actions taking place on stage will reinforce their memories from rehearsals and their cues from their buddy. As with visually impaired actors, they may struggle with personal vanity and need to be reminded to wear hearing aids if they have them. Action cues can be written on props and scenery that the hearing-impaired actor uses. The venue’s sound system may provide adequate increase and consistency of volume to be of benefit for hearing-impaired cast members, or perhaps the particular theater is equipped with an FM loop for hearing aid wearers in the audience and can be adjusted to include actors on stage.

Actors with impairment of one or more “distance senses”²³(vision and hearing) can be allowed to feel they are contributing members of a cast rather than mere “tokens” with a small amount of thoughtful consideration. In addition to the suggestions above, the keeping of routines is essential for the actors in special populations to attain an increase in confidence and a decrease in anxiety. As we shall see throughout the rest of this paper, keeping things the same from rehearsal to rehearsal and performance to performance removes one aspect of uncertainty for all involved and allows everyone to focus on their own and their collective presentations.

Elderly Persons with Personality Issues

It is of overall importance not to label anyone in the cast either negatively or positively. Labels narrow our perception of a person and keep us from seeing any of their other, usually positive, traits. Patterns of behavior become deeply ingrained (habitual) over the course of a life. Elderly actors may come to the community theatre world with personality traits that need special awareness and special handling by the director.

One actor may be quite passive and hesitant to participate fully. The director, vocal director, and choreographer must create and maintain an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement for all. It is best not to single out any one actor for criticism, but rather address the entire cast if a correction is required. Repeated praise and reassurance will allow the shy actor to feel valued for their attempts to try new things. They can thereby feel successful,

²³ Booker, Mary Adelaide. *Developmental Drama: Dramatherapy Approaches for People with Profound or Severe Multiple Disabilities, Including Sensory Impairment*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011, p. 48.

accepted and accomplished, and experience the feelings of community and fun of being part of a show.

Yet another actor may come to the group with a personality that tends to be assertive. This “boss” must be treated with great patience. The director would be wise to acknowledge the person’s ideas and suggestions while also reminding everyone that they (the director) have the unifying vision for the show. Giving the assertive person a necessary task such as taking attendance or setting up chairs for rehearsal is a constructive way to satisfy their need to feel important and be noticed.

A third personality trait a director may encounter when working with elderly persons is negativity. Repeated encouragement and reassurance, again, can ameliorate the effects of such negativity on the entire cast. Keeping the actor busy and engaged leaves little time for complaining; an added benefit is that they may find they actually are enjoying themselves.

As early as 1969, Dr. Stanley A. Czurlies (1969), spokesman at a seminar on “Enlightening Retirement Living through the Arts,” noted: “Age does not stop creative growth, its satisfactions, and developmental values. On the contrary, it frees the individual for the maximum personal involvement. The arts can help the elderly lead increasingly enriching lives.”²⁴

One elderly gentleman of my acquaintance had difficulty getting along with his castmates due to his diminished vision and hearing and his reluctance to ask for assistance. The cast of able-bodied/able-minded younger people became irritated by his mistakes and isolated him further. After one evening’s rehearsal the gentleman walked too close to the edge of the stage,

²⁴ Clark, Patch and Osgood, Nancy J. *Seniors on Stage: The Impact of Applied Theatre*

Techniques on the Elderly. Praeger Publishers, 1985, p. 14.

fell to the auditorium floor, and was severely injured. The casts' annoyance and the gentleman's injury easily could have been avoided by assigning a blocking buddy.

Adaptations for Persons with Mobility Impairment

Among performers who are not able-bodied/able-minded, there is across the board disdain for "inspiration porn"; that is, "the portrayal of people with disabilities as inspirational solely or in part on the basis of their disability".²⁵ In other words, disabled people, including those with impaired mobility, are inspirational for simply living their lives. Overcoming this mindset and being accepted as actors on an equal footing with their able-bodied/able-minded peers may be the greatest challenge facing the actor with impaired mobility. Mobility impairment can be either a temporary or permanent part of anyone's life; certainly any one of us may become ill or injured at any time. A very important point is to neither hide nor draw attention to the impairment on stage; let the character be who the character is.

A person's mobility impairment can range from needing to sit rather than stand, to an inability to move quickly, to the use of aids such as canes, crutches, walkers, and wheelchairs. Therefore, addressing the physical space of the venue is of primary importance. Physical accommodations for mobility-impaired persons consist of more than simply providing a ramp to the stage floor itself. Consideration must be given to providing access to the entrance to the

²⁵ Young, Stella. "We're Not Here for Your Inspiration." Australian Broadcasting Corporation

<http://www.abc.net.au/rampup/articles/2012/07/02/3537035.htm>. Accessed April 6, 2018

2018.

building, the dressing rooms and rest rooms, and the off-stage areas. In some cases, providing access—that is, transportation—to the rehearsal site is necessary depending on the talent pool your theatre company desires to reach. Actors who need transportation to and from rehearsals may be able to take part only if transportation or a stipend to pay for same is available.

Once actors with mobility impairments are in the building and on stage, creativity comes in to play. Safety is the first rule, of course. The stage and all areas must be constructed and configured so as proactively to remedy all foreseeable obstacles. Doorways and wing spaces must be wide enough to allow clearance and furniture and scenery must be placed so as to permit movement around them. It would be beneficial to have your actor “walk the set”; that is, move around it and check for problems as early as possible so that remedies can be made if necessary.

The second consideration is devising blocking for the mobility-impaired actor to best use their physicality and character. Furniture or set pieces may be included and placed so as to provide logical places for actors to lean or sit. As discussed previously, a blocking buddy may be helpful to the mobility-impaired actor, to push a wheelchair or offer a steadying arm. Allow extra time for the mobility-impaired actor to get to their assigned blocking spot. This may entail having them start their entrance early or giving their character a reason to enter later. Keeping their characters on the edge of the scene will shorten the time and distance they need to travel and lessen the likelihood they may be accidentally bumped or tripped by fellow actors.

Choreography for those with mobility impairment should be slower, simpler, and “cuter”.²⁶ For example, tap dancing may be done with the hands instead of the feet; rhythmic

²⁶ Junge, Daniel and Ansbacher, Henry. "We Are Phamaly." VHS, Phamaly & Just Media, 2003,

clapping may become a chance of its own. Do not assume a person's interest or ability in participating in songs or dances, but rather let each make adjustments for their own comfort. One more adaptation is considering "split casting" whereby two actors share the portrayal of one character, each making the most of their particular strengths.

Due in large part to the lack of accessible transportation and venues, most people with mobility impairments have restricted opportunities for theatrical training.^{27, 28} Involvement in community theatre can provide a chance for many who would otherwise remain excluded to learn and develop such skills.

One young leading man suffered a badly sprained ankle shortly before opening night. He was barely able to walk with a cane, let alone dance. The entire show quickly was re-blocked to allow him to sit and lean whenever possible. Dances occurred around him rather than featuring him, and he twirled the cane like a baton or pointed with it as emphasis. No mention of the injury was made onstage. The cane simply became part of his costume and his character.

Adaptations for Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

²⁷ Davies, Rachel. "Magic Mushroom: The Mushroom Theatre Company Helps Children and Young People with Special Needs to Hone Their Performance Skills, and Encourages Integration with the Wider Community, as Rachel Davies Explains." *Learning Disability Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2008.

²⁸ Dacre, Kathy. "Into the Scene and Its Impact on Inclusive Performance Training." *Research in Drama Education*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2009, pp. 133-139.

Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have the same feelings and the same intensity of feeling as persons who are considered neuro-typical, although they may have difficulty describing or sharing those feelings. Rehearsals and performances provide structure and practice ground for exploring and expanding listening skills, eye contact, physical awareness and expressiveness, and general focus and concentration.

“Autism is characterized by significant difficulty with reciprocal social communication; narrow, repetitive, or stereotyped thoughts and behavior; and atypical sensitivity to sensory stimuli.”²⁹ Such give and take of reciprocal communication can be modeled via script work (dialog rehearsal). The person with ASD learns to listen and to take turns talking within the boundaries of scripted dialog. There are no surprises; no need to decide what to say or when to say it, and no sudden topic changes. Every verbal exchange has been decided in advance.

All people, not just those with ASD, can benefit from social cognition skills training. We all need to learn and practice articulation, appropriate speaking volume, awareness of posture and body language, recognizing/reading non-verbal signals, problem solving and negotiation, abstract language, and working with others on a project. All of these areas are practiced as part of the theatre rehearsal and performance process.

Perhaps the most important way to adapt the musical theatre rehearsal process for persons with ASD is to establish structure and keep to routine. Knowing what to expect and what is expected of them can avert feelings of uncertainty and being overwhelmed by the unknown. The

²⁹ Corbett, Blythe A. "Images of Healing and Learning: Autism, Art, and Accessibility to

Theater." *AMA Journal of Ethics*, vol. 18, no. 12, 2016, pp. 1232-1240.

suggestions below will be beneficial to all community theatre ensembles, not only those that include persons with ASD.

Begin each rehearsal in the same manner. Warm-up exercises –physical and vocal (including articulation and volume) –ease the transition from whatever has gone on for the past several hours into the rehearsal time and the next several hours. The actors may need help to settle themselves down from a previous activity and focus on what is ahead. Conversely, they may need help to get energized for action after a long time of stillness. Bringing the group together through a familiar warm-up routine smooths either transition. This time of communal change of focus also serves as a time to put away distractions (phones, friends, flirting) and quiet the mind and the mouth.

After the group has stretched their muscles both physically and vocally, it is time to call them together for announcements about that particular day's schedule and expectations. For example, "Today we're going to start learning to sing Song A as a group. Then the choreographer will work with you while I take these characters (name them) aside to work on their solo songs, one at a time. When I am finished working with you, you will come back here and continue working on the dance."

Break instructions down to small steps so that all the actors, not just those with ASD, build on their own sense of accomplishment and success. Ask if there are questions about any of the directions and answer simply without ridicule or impatience. This is, of course, the ideal in any rehearsal situation, however it is much more important when working with actors in special populations. It is also beneficial to reunite the entire group to work on something together before the end of rehearsal time, as this both reinforces the sense of shared identity and gathers everyone in one place for final announcements, reminders, praise, and dismissal.

Because many performers with ASD have not had much in the way of formal acting training, it is also helpful to have them practice the outward physical signs of various emotions. This can be part of the physical warm-up. Start by pointing out places in the show where characters feel strongly about something. Demonstrate to the group what it can look like when someone is angry, or happy, or scared. Allow some time for cast members to explore for themselves what they might be doing with their face and body in each situation. A final step is to bring awareness to the confusion and comedy that can occur when the attitudes of body and voice are not in agreement with given sections of dialog. Cindy Schneider simplifies this in her book,³⁰ referring to it as “The Big 3”; teaching, modeling, and practicing vocal tone and volume, body language, and facial expression.

Actors are people and people do not fit solely and neatly into any one category. You may find yourself working with a person with Autism Spectrum Disorder who also has impaired mobility. There may be a person who has severe impairment or loss of one of their distance senses. You may have participants who have mental or emotional challenges. If you and your community theatre program are open and welcoming to all, you will encounter more varieties of actors who are not able-bodied/able-minded and neuro-typical. Making yourself aware of the challenges they face and educating yourself on research into recommended approaches for helping them grow and contribute as performers will give them the chance to ignore any labels that have been placed on them by society or by diagnosis and claim with pride a new label of their own choosing: that of “actor”.

³⁰ Schneider, Cindy B. *Acting Antics: A Theatrical Approach to Teaching Social Understanding to Kids and Teens with Asperger's Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.

In my work with students who have special learning needs (including those with ASD), I encountered some who were hesitant to speak and some who had difficulty being quiet. There were several who did not like to be touched and at least one who clung physically on anyone near her. The choreographer and I created character groupings where each student would be least distracted and distracting. This structure and security of having a familiar group of castmates nearby enabled the students to be more successful in their areas of strength and to enjoy their time onstage with less anxiety.

Theater and Venue Accommodations

Physical Surroundings

If a community theatre production is mounted to include special populations onstage and in the audience, then special considerations must be made in several areas. Making community theatre accessible, possible, and welcoming for special populations goes beyond ramps and railings. In order to include persons with mobility impairment, those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or the elderly, an obvious place to start is with accessibility to the rehearsal/performance venue.

Take a walk to and through your facility or better yet procure a wheelchair for yourself to use or invite a wheelchair user to go with you. Notice the physical things that need to be addressed. Is there adequate and nearby accessible parking? Are there power assist buttons at the entrance doors? Alternatively, can someone be stationed by the doors to assist when needed at the beginning and end of rehearsals and shows? Are doorways wide enough for wheelchairs and

the elbows of their users? Are the rest rooms and dressing rooms accessible? Is there clearance to turn corners? Can actors get on and off the stage? Is the set designed to be accessible and safe?

Although physical surroundings are often thought of first when the terms accessibility and accommodations are used, there is more to be considered for the special populations discussed in this paper. As has been mentioned, audio properties may need to be adjusted for hearing-impaired actors. Bright stage lights may be bothersome or blinding to those with visual impairment. Both lighting and blocking can be adjusted in order to make scenes well lit, visible for the audience, and comfortable for the actors.

Yet another area of consideration is costuming. Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder may be bothered by the feel or even the rustle of certain fabrics. Any cast member may be thrown off by the addition of props or costumes without sufficient rehearsal time in which to become comfortable with them. Such items should be introduced as early in the process as possible in order to allow ample opportunity for the actors to become familiar with them.

Call times for tech week rehearsals and performance nights also may need to be adjusted. It can take some cast members longer time to finish costume and make-up. Some may become distracted by the backstage bustle and excitement. Does your cast need assistance with costumes and/or costume changes? Volunteers may be found among their family members and friends. Allow them to exchange a night or two of help for a free ticket to the performance.

Members of the audience from these special populations will likewise benefit from most of these accommodations. Beyond these adjustments, consideration may be given to providing companion seating, sign language interpretation, or comfortable mats for service animals. These special requests could be secured on an as-needed basis if patrons call to make arrangements in

advance. Ushers and box office personnel should be given training in assisting those who require information or directions.

What keeps some people away from community theatre –either on the stage or in the audience –is an inability to get to the venue. At the higher end of the budgetary capabilities is the option to provide transportation to anyone who requests it and makes arrangements ahead of time.

Presentation Format

Community theatre can expand its outreach into the local population by making its performances, not just its surroundings, available to a wider range of people. At the lower end of the cost spectrum, merely softening the volume of audio and technical aspects makes the theatrical experience more pleasant for persons who are sensitive to loud and/or startling sounds. If the venue and budget permit, providing audio description and projecting dialog (captions) on a screen, on the proscenium, or on devices at the seats enable those with lessened visual/auditory abilities to follow the action and dialog more closely.

A new manner of presenting a show is becoming commonplace from Broadway theaters to local stages; the “autism friendly” or “relaxed” performance. A relaxed performance is somewhat less formal of an experience for the audience and it allows persons with various needs to attend without placing demands on them to remain quiet and seated throughout. In such performances the house lights are dimmed but never go completely black. This permits audience members to see each other while still being able to view the action on stage. Sound and lighting settings throughout the performance are diminished so as not to startle or cause discomfort to audience members. Audience members are allowed to get up from their seats and move about if

that helps them to feel comfortable, or to retire to a designated quiet room if need be. Providing fidgets (spinners) and ear plugs are low cost ways to help audience members focus and not become overwhelmed by everything that goes on. By sponsoring a relaxed performance, your community theatre group may allow certain audience members to enjoy the work of their friends or family members for the very first time.

Many persons who are in special populations have limited disposable income. A discounted, “pay what you will”, or free ticket system ultimately removes the final barrier which keeps patrons from community theatre.

Considerations While Working with Special Populations

- Be sure that your venue is accessible for those in the cast and audience.
- Speak directly to the person.
- Do not make assumptions as to what they can or cannot do or want to do.
- Do not mention or point out disabilities unless they do.
- Do use common idioms like “see”, “walk” and “hear”.
- Do say “Would you like assistance?” rather than “Do you need help?”
- Treat mobility aids as part of the person’s body. Do not touch the aid or the person unless asked to do so.
- Speak clearly, normally, and directly to the person.
- Exercise patience for two-way communication to be heard, spoken, and understood.
- Structure in rehearsals provides security, predictability, and focus.

- Include vocal and physical warm-ups. (see Hurley, *175 Theatre Games: Warm-up Exercises for Actors*).
- Clarifications and physical modeling greatly help those who have little training.
- Be wary of forcing a message that is not in the show.
- Find ways to make the impossible possible.

Conclusion

“Participation in the arts is a right, not a privilege.”³¹

The community theatre process can and should be adapted to facilitate participation by a wide variety of amateurs, including elderly persons, persons with mobility impairment, and persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Such participation is beneficial to all involved, both on stage and off. A more open and inclusive community theatre helps all performers physically, mentally, socially, and civically. Advances are made in mental health, interpersonal communication, social interaction, and societal expectations.

Cast members who interact with special populations become more accepting through exposure. As they work with their castmates of all ages and abilities, they are reminded that everyone has their own experiences, as well as areas of strength and areas of weakness. They observe people who must put forth an extra effort to be part of something that they themselves may take for granted.

When physical barriers and procedural assumptions are addressed, then the theatrical community is expanded and begins to resemble society as a whole. The experience of creating art and establishing friendship with their performing peers becomes a reality for many who have been neglected. The inclusion of persons who have been dismissed benefits not only those who work on/present a community theatre show, but also those who see it. Positive depictions of elderly persons, persons with impaired mobility, and persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

³¹ Corbett, Blythe A. "Images of Healing and Learning: Autism, Art, and Accessibility to

Theater." *AMA Journal of Ethics*, vol. 18, no. 12, 2016, pp. 1232-1240.

directly influence the public's perception. Able-bodied/able-minded spectators are exposed to a minority special population member who has been able, for a short time at least, to avoid any other label save for the one they have chosen for themselves –“cast member”. Audience questionnaires³² and focus group interviews³³ have shown that after the initial few moments of a show, audience members no longer see a limitation; they see only the character. Paradoxically, it is this “not seeing” which allows them to envision the person from the special population in a new light. Audience members from those same special populations gain confidence in themselves and in their abilities and may be emboldened to try acting or some other activity which they previously had not considered possible. A perception that is successfully challenged is a perception which is changed.

As discussed above, access to theatrical training has been restricted to persons who are able-bodied/able-minded, neuro-typical, have reliable transportation and possess disposable income. People from special populations who wish to participate in performing arts at any level formerly have faced obstacles that may seem insurmountable. As promulgated in this research, it does not need to remain so. When actors receive training and performing experience, everyone benefits: the actor himself or herself, their castmates, the crew, the audience, and theatre as an art form.

³² Linton, Regan. "Phamaly Theatre Company and Potential Pitfalls: Evita." *TheatreForum*, no. 50, 2016, pp. 15-17.

³³ Gjørnum, Rikke Gürgens and Rasmussen, Bjørn. "The Achievements of Disability Art: A Study of Inclusive Theatre, Inclusive Research, and Extraordinary Actors." *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2017, pp. 99-110.

As special population individuals are better trained and more accepted, they will be considered for a wider range of roles. A study completed in 2016 found that 95% of disabled roles on top ten television shows were not played by actors with disabilities.³⁴ In 2015, American Theatre Organization reported that of the past two years of Broadway shows, only seven featured disabled characters and none of those were played by actors with disabilities.³⁵ As more roles are being created by and for performers from special populations, the availability of competent, trained actors from those populations must increase to fill not only those specific demands but also any role at all. Actors want to be known as actors, not as stereotypes.

Images and narratives in our entertainment media help form the mirror reflecting our society, through which, it could be argued, we gain a sense of community, morality, and self. Without a diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences, prevailing negative attitudes and values remain entrenched and go unchallenged.³⁶

With so much to be gained, it is well worth the expenditure of thought, effort, and, yes, finances needed to ensure that your community theatre group and theater building is welcoming

³⁴ Woodburn, Danny. "On Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television." edited by Ruderman Family Foundation, July 2016 2016. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf, April 19, 2018.

³⁵ Considine, Allison. "Theatre Artists with Disabilities Are Ready, Willing, and, Yes, Able." *American Theatre*, 2015, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/10/20/theatre-artists-with-disabilities-are-ready-willing-and-yes-able/>.

³⁶ O'Reilly, Kaite. "The Necessity of Diverse Voices in Theatre Regarding Disability and Difference." *HowlRound*, 2017, p. 1.

to all. Be clear about your purpose –process or product? Therapy or theatre? Cast the show well and hold all performers to the highest standards. This will involve large doses of teaching and encouragement for all. Professionalism gives validation to performers. “The purpose is ..to respect the fact that society consists of individuals with different abilities and to create work that is a product of this unified whole.”³⁷

An inclusive community theatre program makes room for ordinary people who want to be on stage. These ordinary people may be elderly, have mobility impairment, or have Autism Spectrum Disorder. Ordinary people can be extraordinary members of a production. Find a way to make things work. Magic happens in theatre and it happens most often when limitations are not accepted by anyone.

³⁷ Wooster, Roger. "Creative Inclusion in Community Theatre: A Journey with Odyssey Theatre." *Research in Drama Education*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2009, p. 82.

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