

# *Journal of the International Association of Theatre for Autism*



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Cover Photo: Two actors from the Acting Antics program.

International Association of Theatre for Autism is a global network of parents, professionals, individuals with autism, and others interested in using theatre to help address the issues often associated with autism. It is an entirely free, voluntary, and volunteer based organization at this time. Podcasts, videos, discussion boards, links, and posted autism-theatre events are all utilized by network members to help spread the word about autism and theatre with the goal of positive outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum. Currently, the network features members from many different countries, and each member brings his or her own unique areas of interest and expertise to the community. Please visit [www.autismtheatre.org](http://www.autismtheatre.org) to join and learn more.

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## **A Note from the Editor**

Valerie Paradiz, Ph.D.

In this issue of the Journal of the International Association of Theatre for Autism the world of “applied theater arts” comes to life in its fullest meaning and potential. I hope that, in the pages that follow, you will experience the same thrill I did when reading the amazing variety of contributions of our writers, all of whom are active practitioners and innovators in the field of autism and the theater.

For example, Brian Gordon, director of the Spotlight Program, has created a social skills program for individuals with ASD that is based on the principles of standup comedy performance. “The fundamental difference between a stand-up and an aspie,” Brian writes, “relates to ‘bombing’ or ‘not connecting’ with an audience.” He describes comic performance as “a whole other realm of functional interaction and adaptive life skills,” highlighting in a wonderfully detailed case study just how stand-up training can assist people on the spectrum with “social decoding” and dealing with the “vast number of social variables in the world.”

You’ll also read about Elaine Hall’s remarkable Miracle Project, a Los Angeles based theater program for children with ASD. The Miracle Project has touched the hearts of many through the Emmy award winning HBO documentary, “Autism: The Musical,” which documented Elaine’s transformational work with children on the spectrum. “Until now,” she writes, “parents watched their typical children in plays and sporting events and musical recitals and took their child with special needs only to therapies. To see their

special child acting and singing and dancing in front of an audience was a dream that these parents never dared envision.”

To broaden our horizons even further, we have Australian educator and OT, Jill Maglio, founder of Holistic Circus Therapies, outlining a curriculum that combines occupational therapy theory and practice with the circus arts. In her article, Jill lays out a structured, cumulative approach to providing circus skills acquisition to individuals with developmental and other disabilities. Her teaching incorporates a wide range of activities from clowning, to juggling, to hula hooping, poi and staff spinning. She also adds Acrobalance—or human pyramid—activities and even aerial training!

We also have a contribution from IATA board member, long-time special educator and children’s theater director, Cindy Schneider, creator of Acting Antics, a theater-based educational center located in Pennsylvania. Pointing out that “traditional ‘social skills’ programs have not been very successful in teaching these capable individuals the skills they need in our social world,” Cindy presents targeted and highly-structured curricula designed to reach children of all ages across the entire autism spectrum.

Next, is a personal story from Anna Greenberg, a girl with Asperger’s syndrome who has participated in Cindy Schneider’s Acting Antics program. To me, Anna’s article is the jewel in crown of this issue of the IATA Journal because she lets us know just how much theater has supported her in developing friendships, greater self-awareness and confidence and a person with a disability. “I liked knowing that a lot of kids have disabilities,” she writes about the classes she participated in. “I’m not the only one.”

Professor Parasuram Ramamoorthi offers readers a review of Jill Mullin's new book, *Drawing Autism*. Additionally, Mandu's article "Not Even Wrong," gives us a glimpse into the world of theater as an educational tool not only for individuals on the spectrum, but for neurotypicals who haven't had the opportunity to learn about autism.

Some people say that the theater is like a family. Whether we're on stage, in performance, in rehearsal, or practicing new techniques, we become naturally connected and interdependent in ways that direct us toward social and personal growth, and most of all, a sense of belonging. I wish to express my thanks to all the contributors of the journal for creating safe forums for individuals with autism and related conditions to learn and grow! In closing, I would like to thank Andrew Nelson of IATA for his generous editorial support for this issue of the journal.

## The Miracle Project

Elaine Hall  
“Coach E”

What makes The Miracle Project a “miracle?” Is it that children of all abilities come together each week to dance, sing, and create theater together? Is it because parents have an opportunity to share with each other their hopes, dreams, fears, and joys in a supportive environment, outside the therapeutic community? Or is it because volunteers and arts specialists, who have little or no experience in special education, soon become “experts” with these children simply by opening their hearts and minds and realizing that children with autism are children first – and like any child need love, acceptance, and a space to be themselves in order to shine?

Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” For the past five years I have been privileged to witness miracles on a daily basis in my work as founder and director of The Miracle Project, and for the past 13 years as the mother of a minimally fluent son with autism.

When traditional therapies did not work for my son, Neal, adopted from a Russian orphanage at age two and diagnosed with autism at age three, I sought the guidance of Dr. Stanley Greenspan whose developmental and relationship based methodology was just gaining public attention. Neal was extremely withdrawn; he had no eye contact, spun in circles, banged his

head, stacked cars, and stared at his hand for hours at a time. Through Dr. Greenspan’s DIR/Floortime model, I learned, among many things, that emotion drives cognition and that relationship is paramount. Dr. Greenspan showed me how to develop a dynamic relationship and joint attention with my son by following his lead, understanding his sensory needs, and honoring his individual differences.

The therapeutic community in my town was not aware of the DIR approach and even disregarded it as non-scientific and unproven. This led me to quit my job as a Hollywood children’s acting coach and begin to train actors, writers, musicians, dancers, and other creative folk in the DIR methodology. With the help of DIR certified facilitator, DanaKae Bonahoom, and the many others who joined my son’s world 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, Neal gradually emerged into our world as a bright, emotional, mischievous, and connected child.

When it was time for Neal to return to a public school environment, and time for me to return to work, I didn’t know what to do professionally. I literally prayed to G-d for my path and the answers came loud and clear, “teach children with special needs to act, sing, and dance.” In the eleventh hour, I wrote a grant - fortunately got it - and The Miracle Project was born. I rallied a cadre of volunteers who were actors, dancers, singers, etc. and trained them in the

same protocols that had been so successful for Neal. I encouraged them to follow the children's lead, to see each child as an individual, to see each behavior as communication – to listen to the child who did not speak.

The first evening of The Miracle Project was chaotic. Fifteen kids took part. Some did not want to leave their parents or enter the room. Others entered reluctantly, holding onto their mother's legs. Some "momma bears" didn't want to let go of their cubs even if the cubs were fine.

I encouraged our team members to heighten their curiosity for each child's individual needs. One child hid under a table. I guided a volunteer to go under the table with the child. Another child ran around the table in circles. I encouraged a staff member to turn this into a playful game of chase and tag. When another child pulled the carpet over his head, I instructed a team member to explore this "under-rug-world" with him and their interaction turned into a game of "peek-a-boo." Slowly we brought the group together into one large circle for a group warm-up.

We told each other our names, acting them out with movement and rhythm. "C O A C H E!" I say, opening up my arms on the word "Coach" and clapping them together on the "E." I asked everyone to repeat it with me. Each child said their name with a rhythm or a movement, and together the group replied with the same in acknowledgment. If a child was too shy or reserved to do so, we said their names with them or for them. If it was too loud when we repeated it, we whispered their

names instead, whatever that child needed.

We then danced together, crossing the floor with hops, skips, slides and "silliness." When kids flapped, or walked on tip toes or did other "socially unacceptable" behaviors we applauded them. We joined them. We turned every movement into dance. We learned songs together, turned their shouts into music, we expressed our emotions and pretended to be different characters and animals.

At the end of the evening, we invited the parents into the room to witness a brief snippet of what the kids did that night. The parents loved what they saw. The children were happy. And our staff was ecstatic.

During the first eleven weeks of The Miracle Project, we helped the children participate more and more with the group. Up to now, most of the children had been successful only in one-on-one therapies - one child strayed from the group, another was so afraid of being photographed, he had tantrums when he saw the camera; another was hypersensitive to noise and spent most of each session crying and holding her ears.

Our task was to find ways to help every child join the others, and we did. We noticed that the child who strayed loved to draw. We brought in markers so he could join the group, sitting during class and drawing cartoon characters. Only eight years old, and he draws like a professional. We marvel at his drawings and, every now and then, encourage him to participate in the group, first for just a minute at a time, then two, then three –

until one day he joins the other students and exults, “I’m participating!”

Our videographer, my friend and acting coach colleague, Kevin McDermott, approached the child who feared being photographed and teaches him about the inner workings of the camera. Soon the child’s fear fades and he comes to enjoy everything about video. A volunteer “buddy” stays with the child who is sound-sensitive, letting her know that she can leave the group whenever it becomes too loud for her. He also teaches her to indicate in sign language the word STOP. He teaches the group to read her cues. Now, when she motions for them to STOP, the group sees her communication and quiets down.

As we worked on our musical, the children transformed. The child who had isolated himself is now leading the group in song. Though he has extreme tactile sensitivity, he’s able to wear the scratchy prop beard that the other kids are wearing. The child who refused to be photographed plays a lead character in the video portion of our show and is featured in the live performance. We film parts of each child’s performance as a “safety net;” if any child gets stage fright they will still have their moments to shine in the performance. Just knowing that greatly reduces the anxiety levels of the children and their parents.

As the kids rehearse, we have a member of the clergy meet with the parents to help them frame their experiences with their special child in terms of their own spiritual growth. In the monthly spiritual support group, parents share their joys, challenges and accomplishments – all the while focusing on what is good, positive, and

right with their children. The parents become a large extended family. We share birthdays, holidays, our kids have play dates. For all of us, that persistent sense of isolation is gone. We are no longer alone.

Finally – The performance. The audience witnesses what we have been observing during the weeks of rehearsal: special children and typically developing peers, singing, dancing, and acting together as a tight ensemble. As their director, I have lost track of who has special needs and who does not. Now we are all simply members of The Miracle Project Players.

The child who covered her ears stands center stage and sings to the audience, her face beaming. In the audience, her parents beam back at her, hang on every note, and shed tears of joy –they are transformed. And the other parents are also undergoing a metamorphosis. Until now, these parents watched their typical children in plays and sporting events and musical recitals and took their child with special needs only to therapies. To see their special child acting and singing and dancing in front of an audience was a dream that these parents never dared envision.

I am one of those parents too, and I will never forget the sense of joy and gratitude that overwhelmed me upon seeing Neal’s angelic, glowing face on film as he “hit his mark,” and hummed sweetly.

Everything that I imagined that fateful day when I wrote the grant for The Miracle Project has come to pass. Our feelings of joy and accomplishment are profound. As I had promised, the kids

take their bows to standing ovations and there is not a dry eye in the house.

What a gift that night was. We all learned, as parents of children with autism, that we can raise our expectations of what is possible, we can hope, we can have dreams for our children. That night proved to us all that in an environment of creativity, love, and acceptance, miracles can and do happen.

*....The Miracle Project is the subject of the Emmy Award winning HBO documentary, "Autism: The Musical." The very same children who were afraid to speak out in a group, now perform at benefits all over Southern California to*

*star-studded audiences of 500 people are more. Elaine Hall is the co-producer of the DVD series, "Unlocking the World of Autism – 7 Keys to Being Miracle Minded" for medical professionals. She is a keynote speaker throughout the United States and Canada, was invited to speak and perform with her troupe at the United Nations on behalf of Autism Enrichment Programs, and is co-writing the music for a children's CD "Fly Into the World of Autism" which pairs children on the spectrum with celebrity artists, such as Jack Black, Chaka Chan, and Stephen Stills. Her memoir, "Now I See the Moon: A Story of Unlikely Miracles" will be released by Harper Collins in spring, 2010.*

## Acting with Special Needs

Anna Greenberg

This summer, my sister and I participated in two sessions of a Musical Theater camp at a place called Acting Antics, out in Chester County. It was a fun camp, for children diagnosed with special needs like autism, which I have. Not all of the kids in the group have special needs, but most do. My sister and I love theater and have done many plays at home for our parents and grandparents, but we have always wanted to perform on a real stage with a real cast. So, we were so happy when we found Acting Antics, made just for kids with disabilities. We didn't even mind the hour-long drive to get there because, at Acting Antics, we got to perform on a real stage. It was a dream come true. I liked rehearsing, working with everybody to put our performance, doing the finale, and just being on the stage. I felt like a real actress getting ready for a big show. One thing I really liked about this group was knowing that I'm not the only one who has a disability. I also liked learning the songs that we were going to be performing and singing along with them on the special CD that

the director gave us. Also, the director and her assistants taught us choreography, which was fun. I liked meeting new kids. Sometimes at snack break, the kids told jokes and laughed at different things. Some of the kids were wild and liked to crack up other kids. One of the boys was very into rock-music and like to pretend he was Ozzy Osborne. Some of the kids were naughty and liked to throw food during snack break. In one of the sessions we made friends with this eight-year-old girl who was very nice and was even in a play of 'Annie.' Another girl would always look at us and say 'Hi Anna!' 'Hi Lena!' which was friendly. All the kids were very nice. I liked Acting Antics because I liked knowing that lot of kids have disabilities; I'm not the only one. I also liked making friends with the other kids and performing on a real stage with a curtain. That's the best part. I like being onstage for the big finale and putting what we learned all together for the show. When we take our final bows, we get wonderful applause.

## Setting the Stage for Social Success

Cindy B. Schneider

Persons diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (AS) lack the understanding of non-verbal communication that so many of us take for granted. A nod of the head, a smirk, a change in voice tone is so often misinterpreted or totally missed by those with this diagnosis. If you do not read these non-verbal signals, you are not likely to send the appropriate non-verbal messages either.

Additionally, youngsters with AS often interpret language literally and miss the more abstract references. These youngsters often have difficulty building relationships with their peers. For this reason many of these individuals also suffer with poor self-esteem. Yet traditional “social skills” programs have not been very successful in teaching these capable individuals the skills they need in our social world.

After over 20 years as a special educator and autism consultant and 20 years as a children’s theater director, an exciting idea began to form. The idea combined my lifelong passion for theatre with my desire to help students with AS and related diagnoses improve their social understanding and awareness. The program developed over the next several years, and became known as ACTING ANTICS. Six years later, the Acting Antics Art Center was born. The center now offers programs for preschoolers through adulthood, at a variety of developmental levels. The response from participants and families has been extremely positive.

Although we offer many levels of classes, the focus of this article will be on our classes that are designed for the youngsters and adults with higher cognition and language skills, and social deficits such as seen in high-functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome. After all, what is *acting* all about? It is about reading and portraying emotions by using your voice as well as non-verbal communication. It is about acting and reacting. It is about developing a relationship with other actors onstage. It is about interpreting the language of a script. Is that not a perfect match for students with the social deficits mentioned above?

It is important in these classes that everyone is made to feel entirely comfortable in the first session. Activities will include on whole group games, and simple activities designed to put actors at ease and not put anyone on the spot. As the instructors get to know the actors, and the actors get more comfortable with one another, the bar is raised and actors are gradually asked to leave the comfort zone and take some risks.

Humor is an essential tool in our workshops. It is often said that people with HFA and AS do not understand humor, which often involves multiple meanings or wordplay, which can be very abstract. However, if taught how to interpret humor, these individuals often have a profound response to the humor in these abstractions, and are eager to

grow their repertoires of puns, jokes and the like.

Our instructors teach some of our basic prefects in the initial class. First they review the two universal rules of acting. The first is “Never hurt another actor”. While discussing that rule, our actors tend to discuss staged fighting and special effects. Then actors are asked if it is possible to hurt an actor in a way other than physically. Discussion ensues about hurting feelings, or being disruptive while someone is performing, or being hurtfully critical of someone’s work. The second rule is “Listen to the director.” Actors are asked what they think would happen to a movie if all of the actors did exactly what they wanted, chose their own parts, and said whatever they wanted to say. Often we will talk about a current movie, and the actors get a clear picture of the chaos that could have resulted if no one was at the helm. These are the only two rules we need in acting class, because they cover everything!

Next the students are introduced to the “Big 3.” These are 1) vocal tone and volume, 2) body language, and 3) facial expression. These are depicted with words and drawings on a poster that hang in the theater. Often this is introduced by having the instructor make a grand entrance into the group. The instructor will stomp into the room, scowling and growling with arms crossed. He/she saunters over to the group, saying in a low, grouchy, and unconvincing voice, “I am so happy to see you all here today.” Generally, because it is so exaggerated, the actors recognize the ridiculousness of the words and have a good laugh. The instructor will then ask if the actors

believed that he/she was happy to see them. They will then be led to identify the specifics of the instructor’s non-verbal cues that belied the words uttered. At this point the instructor will often have one of the actors demonstrate a more positive entrance. We then review the changes in the “Big 3” that made it believable the second time.

Reading and utilizing the “Big Three” becomes a focus of our sessions, but there are many other skill areas that are targeted through the theater activities. These include many of the executive function skills that are difficult for so many individuals with neurological differences. These include skills such as initiating and sustaining a task, organizing and prioritizing, shifting from one thing to another. The goal is for every actor to be successful in each activity, and that success is huge in terms of building self-esteem. Actors work in partners and in groups with instructors facilitating cooperation and flexibility, both of which are difficult skills for individuals on the autism spectrum to master.

Actors participate in some icebreakers and warm-up games, designed to increase their comfort level and begin interactions with one another. These activities also assist the instructors in getting to know the actors before assigning scenes. In subsequent classes, the actors are assigned partners and are sent off to work on short scripted scenes. The adults circulate to facilitate, and then the actors regroup to perform the first ‘public’ reading of their scene. There is discussion about what it means to be an audience member, and the expectation that the actors will observe and make *positive* comments about their

fellow actors' use of the "BIG 3." Actors will continue to rehearse these scenes throughout the sessions in preparation for the final performance.

The scenes we use in our classes range widely in reading level, abstract language, social topics, and character development. Antics instructors are encouraged to modify the scenes to the specific needs of the actors, as the scenes were written by this author. The group will also work on a larger skit that involves all of the actors. These are usually shorter, silly skits that tend to have a punch line. The actors love these, and it really gives them a chance to work together as a company. These usually involve some costuming and props, which adds to the fun!

Other activities involve improvisational activities that again have the actors working in a small group. One such activity is called "Slow News Day" in which each group comes up with its own newscast. In another improvisational activity called "Sell Your Partner," in which the actor conducts a structured interview of a partner, and then develops a sales pitch about his/her partner, using a 'used car salesman' persona. This activity is a great way for actors to learn about another person, and to begin to think about their own strengths and differences.

On the final day of class, the actors present a "showcase" for family and friends. The showcase consists of demonstrations of many activities, performances of the scenes and skits, and presentation of one of the improvisation activities. This is a great culmination of the workshop, and a real self-esteem builder for the actors.

Through these and many other activities, the actors have a wonderful time interacting with their peers, and working on their social deficits, all in the name of *theater*. Many individuals with AS spend years being dragged to "social skills" groups in school or in the community. They often know that they don't "get it", and hate going once again to a group that focuses on what they do not do well. It is much more effective to find a program that is fun and activity-based, and build the social cognition skills into that activity. Acting is a perfect vehicle for this as it intrinsically works on interaction as the integral part of the craft.

Parents and students have responded tremendously to this program. One parent commented after being in the next room during his son's first session, "I have never before seen my son engaged and laughing in a group of peers for two solid hours. Thank you." Students who have reportedly 'failed' in many other situations have been successful in our theater program.

School districts in eastern Pennsylvania have been getting on board with this approach to teaching social cognition, and that is most exciting. Three districts brought our program to the district for Extended School Year instruction, and five others paid to have youngsters attend our summer programs. One Chester county district has brought the Acting Antics in during the school year as a pilot program in social instruction. Special educators will be trained in the program and will be coached the following year by this author.

The Acting Antics program has been run in five different counties, and each

session has been amazingly successful. There is a tremendous need to bring this program to many communities and schools, so that more individuals can reap the recreational and social benefits. These youngsters have so many gifts that stay hidden far too often. My mission is to teach professionals how to run this program in local communities and schools. The world is indeed a stage, and we need to provide our youngsters with the tools they need to flourish on that stage!

*Cindy Schneider's book, **ACTING ANTICS, a theatrical approach to teaching social understanding to kids and teens with Asperger Syndrome**, was published in 2007 by Jessica Kingsley Publishing, and has a foreword written by Dr. Tony Attwood. Cindy has presented her techniques to parents and professionals throughout the United States and in Canada. Cindy runs the Acting Antics program in eight-week sessions during the school year for students of all ages. Acting Antics also conducts summer camp programs for a variety of age and ability levels.*

## Comedy and Autism: A Parallel Universe

Brian Gordon

### Introduction

A person walks into a room full of people with a very obvious look of purpose on his face. His mission: to make friends with everyone and anyone at any cost! He is beyond noticeably b-lining for everyone's attention. As is usually the case, all heads turn his way as he makes his "entrance". He recites his prepared opening line perfectly (he believes it to be both crowd-winning and hilariously funny). In his mind there is no doubt that humor is the correct formula for winning acceptance. Will they take to him? Does he even realize they may not – and what then? It's been said that 5 seconds is all a person gets before he is sized up and some decision has been made as to whether he is worth the effort (for now) or he has just inspired some variation of "precious irretrievable moments of joy in life are about to be sucked out of the universe". In moments like this particularly as it pertains to understanding the effect of one's actions in relation to others, it is especially difficult for this person to tell the difference between a ritual and a bad habit. Is there ever really a difference depending on the situation? If connecting with others is a language then it has irregular rules of grammar that could only have been created by an illogical mind.

Sound familiar? I suppose based on where you are reading this there is little doubt that I am describing the typical social engagement of an individual with

Asperger's or high functioning autism. In reality (and from experience) what I just described was a typical moment in the life of a stand-up comic.

The fundamental difference between a stand-up and an aspzie relates to "bombing" or "not connecting" with an audience.

A seasoned comic can tell fairly quickly whether an audience isn't buying what he's selling, not because the product isn't good but because the sales pitch needs to be altered somewhat this time around. That is the challenge and the joy. Stand-up is an attempt to master the art of live communication. A lot of people become comics because they are attempting to handle the reality of being misunderstood.

An Aspzie assumes the product is good for everyone and never attempts to "read" or "decipher how to access" an audience because he is unaware that there is even such a necessary thing as a sales pitch. The result most of the time is somewhat akin to a meat salesman confidently pushing beef at a convention for vegetarians.

By virtue of a comic's compassion for social failure and a honed skill for effective social decoding and making adjustments to limit miscommunication between him and others, it would stand to reason that comedians could be of great use in the social/emotional

upbringing of children with Autism and other forms of social/emotional deficit.

Welcome to my world.

Within a span of five years I went from aspiring stand-up comic to Autism educator, counselor and mentor/social decoder, presenter at local and national conferences, and program director of an innovative drama-based social pragmatics intervention, all passionately focused on carrying out social skills education for children with ASD and other core forms of social/emotional deficit. My schooling for this came from over ten years and 10,000 dedicated hours (see: Malcolm Gladwell's book "Outliers") of functional interaction and adaptive life skills training in that other world of stand-up comedy.

### **Total Serendipity**

Working in special education happened utterly by accident. Truth be said, I had never even heard the word Asperger's prior to that first employer who thought to redirect me into the position of "community-based life coach/employment specialist" for a teen with a diagnosis of the same name. Initially, I had applied for an "art teacher" opening and decided to give the other job a try.

A few months prior to taking that job I had had a simultaneous parallel thought (a realization, really) while on stage telling a joke: I really needed to get a life! I was working 9-5 weekdays (mostly as a temporary employee - where one experiences all the tormented anxiety of the "first day" at a new job...every day) and then was off to a comedy club somewhere by 7pm (5-6

nights a week). I hadn't taken a vacation in 4 years and finally there I was standing there that night on stage with no recognizable new life experiences to convert into exciting, worthwhile premises and material. I was comfortable on stage but that just wasn't enough. So I hatched a plan.

I would not allow myself to step foot on a stage for an entire year nor would I allow myself to visit any comedy shows either. I vowed to live and work in an area new to me because I needed to reconnect to life in a way that would grow fresh perspective. The position as community-based life-skills mentor to teens with developmental disabilities certainly seemed to fit the description.

My first student was a 19 year old with Asperger's named "Scott" (his parents told me he had Asperger's because they were sure I wouldn't know what PDD/NOS was - *I didn't bother to tell them that I didn't know either*). The first meeting went reasonably horrible. Scott swore at me, wouldn't engage in eye contact, spoke about me in the third person to his parents (as if by doing that I wouldn't hear what he was saying about me despite the fact that I was standing mere inches away), he asked "where the hell is the last person!" that worked with him, and then marched back upstairs to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. I totally "bombed". His parents looked embarrassed. I found the whole awkward experience somewhat humorous. I should tell you that I have come to view awkward moments as illusions that, when embraced, give way to greater individual functionality. Awkward moments are not boring; they are the candy-coated playground of a

comic. I think I may be an embarrass-aholic.

Comedians don't take bombing personally – you're in the wrong business if you do. Your job is to accept the possible outcome of social failure each time you face an audience. What was happening was par for course, didn't need to be taken personally, and, honestly, made me even more inquisitive about working with Scott. All we needed was the chance to see eye to eye and, hopefully, I would be given that chance. I recall thinking to myself that he had a good point and I wondered why he wasn't told ahead of time that someone different would be coming over to work with him. I felt bad that he had to go through that. At that moment I thought it best not to open my mouth to speak first. To my surprise his mother told me Scott was excited to work with me, and she knew this because he wouldn't have even come downstairs at all if he didn't accept me as his new mentor. My instincts told me there was more to Scott than his history suggested: a person who had failed out of every mainstream public school opportunity, pretty much sat on the couch or behind the computer all day, possessed no functional understanding of the passing of time in seconds, minutes, or hours, hardly ever went outside, was obsessed with WWII, travel was pretty much confined to appointments at the therapist's or to his grandparents for dinner once a week (to chat about WWII with his grandfather who flew in the war), and who was, coincidentally, a fan of stand-up comedy.

### **Flash Forward: You Can't Put a Cap on Potential**

Within a year and half of working with Scott, he went from a socially phobic homebody with severe theory of mind deficit, transition issues, very little emotional self control, and no formal concept of how time functioned to someone who could confidently travel on commuter rail trains by himself, reentered high school, joined an authentic regalia-clad troop of Star Wars devotees (Scott was one of four chosen from over 15,000 nominees globally to be in "Star Warriors", a documentary made George Lucas about this troop), overcame serious auditory sensory issues, went from almost being fired from a volunteer job to receiving a "valuable employee" award, and began, most importantly, to trust himself out in the world and see it as a place with endless personal promise and opportunity.

For my part...I had found new meaning and perspective: I got a life!

### **Experience at Work**

Night after night (and during countless impromptu performances while "socializing" out in public) stand-up taught me to take what people know and use it as a vehicle to explain what I wanted them to know, only now I was putting this to use with students like Scott.

Very quickly I began to see that the skill doing comedic "crowd work" was directly transferable to this newfound vocation. Comedians, most of us, are natural social decoders blessed with an

uncanny, innate ability to recognize and associate vast amounts of social variables in the world. It is primarily the performance-oriented comics (versus the comic actors) who consciously break down the wall between themselves and the audience, night after night, in search of using this skill to access the channels of pleasure and logic of an audience. Be it 1,000 people or a single person, through sensing and using information (those relevant variables) for the purpose of constructing, sometimes within a split second of spotting an opening, an analogy that teaches people what you need them to know, the ultimate goal in human interaction occurs: charged, reciprocal interaction. It functions after a while like a reflex. This is what I found brings about the quickest social learning and emotional growth for students. And, this process is fun, too!

It's also important to mention that comedians make excellent social skill mentors because we get rewarded for knowing a little about a lot of things. We are trivia experts, which makes it easier to align ourselves with people's varying interests. And even if we don't possess knowledge on a subject, we are really good at asking interesting questions in order to learn more and sustain a conversation. We're like roving, interactive anthropological think tanks. We say "yes" to our present situation and use whatever is at hand to stabilize a situation and/or elevate it, hopefully, to a place of greater, mutual functionality. What we do is akin to the 80s television show "MacGyver", where the clever and inventive nonviolent hero of the same name solves problems in his own unique way using whatever objects are at hand. Comedians use pieces of personal information to be "Social

MacGyvers". Here's an example illustrating this point:

Scott's parents had asked that part of my time with their son be dedicated to improving his ability to accept sudden changes in his daily routine. I used stopping to get gas as a vehicle [pardon the pun] to accomplish this task and built out from there. It began with only getting the gas and then eventually moved on to pulling up to the store at the station to get a drink, too. A lot went into this seemingly simple act. He freaked out about it the first time, but here's how I processed with Scott to handle these transitions better, in general, while also addressing his difficulty in understanding the basics of how time functioned. It went something like this:

Scott: [raising his voice] Oh no! Oh no!  
We're going to my job at cat shelter!

Why the hell are we stopping?

Brian: Good question. Guess What?

(This is a great calming and redirection tool).

Scott: What?

Brian: You want to get to the cat shelter right?

Scott: Yes.

Brian: So do I...but guess what?

Scott: What?

Brian: If we don't put some gas in this car then you know what will happen?

Scott: What?

Brian: We won't be able to go play with the "cute kitties" (he's crazy about cute kitties!). So, should we fill'er up?

Scott: Yes (somewhat less agitated now).

I started with a question to confirm what he wanted and then worked with him so that he was the one who decided that stopping was necessary. What came

next made for better relationship development and growth in problem solving.

Brian: Cool. I agree. You want to help pump the gas or wait in the car? [I've found that humans love options and options offer agency and agency makes a person feel more in control].

Scott: I'll wait in the car.

Brian: Fine by me. Can I ask you a question before I pump the gas?

Scott: What?

Brian: Did it worry you when you saw me going somewhere you didn't expect?

Scott: Yeah.

Brian: Would it be better in the future if I notify you ahead of time?

Scott: Yes. [A smile appeared on his face accompanied by minor flapping – eventually I came to understand that flapping or “stimming”, for Scott, symbolized any of the following things: regulation, engagement, enjoyment, and/or growth/illumination,]

Brian: You raised your voice. Were you angry?

Scott: Yes.

Brian: Did you think I was trying to make you mad?

Scott: Yes.

Brian: I can see how you would feel that way [Scott: confused/inquisitive look].

Are you mad now?

Scott: No...not really.

Brian: Hmm...do you still think I was trying to make you mad?

Scott: No.

Brian: Cool. Guess what? Did you know that you don't have to raise your voice for me to believe that you're mad?

Scott: No.

Brian: No. Okay, question...so if we could do this over would you do anything different?

Scott: I don't know what you are talking about.

Brian: I mean, if we were just pulling in now to get the gas would you still get mad and raise your voice or would you ask me why we're going somewhere not on the schedule?

Scott: I would ask you first.

Brian: Would you raise your voice?

Scott: No.

Brian: Why?

Scott: Because you might not be trying to make me mad.

Brian: You mean I might have a good reason for stopping?

Scott: Yes

Brian: Cool. And because you would want to make sure you don't have to get nervous or be angry, right? Really, who wants to get that way if they don't have to, right?

Scott: I don't know what you are talking about!

Brian: I mean, you would ask first just in case you can avoid getting mad.

Scott: ...Yeah [smile and slight look of “what planet are you from”].

Brian: I'm sorry what I did made you nervous and mad...but isn't it good that this happened?

Scott: What...why!

Brian: Because. Now we understand each other better and can treat each other better. I know to tell you things ahead of time and if I forget you know to ask what's going on so you don't have get mad or nervous if you don't have to, right?

Scott: Yeah [total look of appreciation and understanding].

Brian: Oh my G\_D!

Scott: [somewhat taken off balance] What?!#&

Brian: We...are...becoming...friends (then I make goofy karate chop gesture).

Scott: You're weird... (smile)

Brian: I'm gonna go pump the gas now so we can get to the cat shelter.

Through the use of simple, constructive questions I was able to validate Scott's reaction/feelings and move him in the direction of greater processing. I've found that questions activate focus much quicker than statements. I try to pack conversations full of questions. Given the initial restricted number of variables that Scott was using at the time to process that situation, he was perfectly valid in reaching his original intellectual and emotional conclusion: anxiety and anger. My job was to provide the simplest way possible for him to both recognize my perspective and learn, more importantly, how to increase the amount of variables that he naturally uses to better process situations like that one in the future. That success Scott had can be used in the future as an example to help with similarly related events that he can't naturally extract from relative memory for use. As I pumped the gas I stole looks through the window at Scott whose expressions went back and forth from seriousness to smiles accompanied by approving nods both to himself and what seemed like an invisible audience.

During a subsequent visit to the gas station I discovered Scott's inability to conceptualize time and was able to use his love of Star Wars to help him. Here's how it went down:

Brian: I am going inside to get a drink:

Scott: Why?!

Brian: (calmly) Because I am thirsty, need water, and if I don't then I could faint and crash the car and we wouldn't get to your job at the shelter...so...can I get the drink?

Scott: Okay (look of annoyed tolerance)

Brian: You want to come in with me? [at this point he still was too nervous to enter public places].

Scott: How long is it going to take [agitated]?

Brian: Five minutes.

Scott: What?!#%. No! That's too long!!!

Brian: Scott...[brain working incredibly fast right now because comedians have to be able to shift on a mental dime]...okay...guess what?

Scott: What?

Brian: Remember the scene in Star Wars where Luke and Ben Kenobi enter the Cantina on Mos Eisley?

Scott: Yeah [excited]...

Brian: Picture that...now, remember the part where Han Solo shoots Greedo under the table?

Scott: Yeah [even more excited]...In the remake George Lucas makes Greedo shoot first which completely undermines the eventual moral growth that Han reaches at the end of "A New Hope". A lot of people think that's the first movie but it's the fourth!

Brian: Totally agree but guess what?

From the moment they walk into the Cantina to the moment Greedo gets shot...that's about five minutes.

Scott: [pausing and thinking intensely]

Hey, that's not that long.

Brian: I know [smiling]. See you in about five minutes. You sure you don't want to come with me.

Scott: No thanks.

I knew that Scott liked Star Wars so I used it to explain time to him. What I first needed to understand was that five minutes might as well have been five years to Scott – he couldn't tell the difference. Eventually, I was able to use his love for music (the length of songs) for the same purpose. I even began to

use music and Star Wars to help him understand his own behavior and the behavior of others. Proper analogy building is an incredibly effective cognitive processing tool for intervention and social/emotional learning. As a comic I naturally weighed heavily on analogies to convey joke premises.

### **Another Missing Piece**

The one thing I wished for Scott was more work in a group dynamic. He became great at the 1:1 but thriving in a group setting probably should have been a precursor to intensive community-based 1:1 work with me. When Scott turned 22 (this is the age when Massachusetts is no longer responsible for funding a person's education) I stopped working with him through the community-based program. Shortly after that point I switched jobs and became director of the Spotlight Program. This was a missing piece, a program that focused on social learning in a group setting through the use of theatrical performance, particularly improvisational exercises, and all the while taking into account each child's individual interests to be used as an integral piece of the intervention.

It was an environment where kids could focus on having fun and making friends. It is a complement to a rules- or etiquette-based curriculum used in most schools. Some kids just don't generalize skills well that way. For example, you can tell a child to make eye contact if they are talking with someone but it doesn't necessarily provide a functional understanding of "why" it is important: gathering social data. Theater games can be used to provide that "why". The

games contain the necessary structure children need but with freedom within the parameters of that structure to explore creativity and learn how to confidently and competently "get off script". Basically, this kind of experience allows children to learn social skills through the act of being social. The goal is not to build one type of child but to approach each child based on who he is and what makes the most sense to him when we go about explaining all the "why's" behind all the what he needs to know about the social world. While learning to function successfully in a group there is always individual growth in self esteem and social competence occurring in a fun environment that embraces reasonable expectations for each member. It's the best of both worlds. Kids don't feel like they are part of another therapy and parents know that their children are taking part in an effective clinical intervention that focuses on their child making and maintaining friends, learning and using social skills, and building solid self esteem.

### **At the Present**

There is still so much to learn and do. Again, you can't put a cap on potential – on your own or anyone else's. I still perform stand-up but I see now that it was a vehicle to a whole other fulfilling life. My experiences as a stand-up comic assisted me in redefining my passion and dedication to something bigger than me. I still work privately with Scott and believe me when I say that we teach each other. I find great pleasure in presenting to other professionals on the subject of social pragmatic education for children and adults with social/emotional challenges.

I also am involved in numerous classroom observations that lead to great dialogue with other teachers as they seek to improve the quality of life for their students with social challenges.

In November of this year I was invited and spoke at a Harvard Medical School conference on Autism Research and Modalities of Intervention. I felt incredibly welcome by the other faculty at the conference. Some feedback from those who attended my talk included: “Engaging and Insightful”; “Incredibly Informative”; “Lively and Entertaining”; and [most importantly, to me] “Very Accessible”.

Milton Berle once described humor as revenge. Interesting thought. Perhaps that was a joke. My sincere belief is that real humor comes from identifying with another’s pain or embarrassment. We see ourselves in the same position as the

person before us and the situation is just too emotionally charged to do anything other than laugh about it. Tricky thing humor – it comes without warning and even more often without apology.

Humor is a pressure valve that opens involuntarily to prevent the nervous breakdown. Without humor our species would have died out long ago of neurological trauma. Additionally, pain is just an indefinite period of time in life until we get the joke.

Please know that I take what I do very seriously.

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## Holistic Circus Therapies: Empowering People through Engagement in Circus

Jill Maglio

### ***Introduction***

*Holistic Circus Therapies* is a registered and accredited private practice that combines Occupational Therapy theory and practice with circus arts as an intervention to address the unique health and well being needs of individuals and communities. Holistic Circus Therapies partners with circus schools, community centers, and disability service providers to enable people with varying abilities to have access to and benefit from circus and performing arts programs. Collaboration has the potential to provide an effective multi discipline health care approach to meet the diverse needs of people with disabilities as well as offer access to and increase participation in community arts.

### ***Background***

*Holistic Circus Therapies* began in 2008 after 3 years of study and collaboration of circus and occupational therapy theory by Jill Maglio in Melbourne Australia. The benefits of a circus skills program to address the needs of young people were demonstrated after Jill managed a project with Westside Circus in 2005, looking at the effects of a circus skills program on young people's acquisition of "life skills". The term "life skills" is used as an umbrella term for self confidence, self efficacy, problem solving skills, trust, communication, leadership, ways to

be aware of and enhance physical, emotional and mental health. During Jill's experience and research, it became evident that group circus activities promote the acquisition of life skills inherent to healthy development that many young people are not given enough opportunities in school or at home to develop. Upon completion of a master's degree in occupational therapy at Latrobe University, Jill continued investigating the effects of circus on health and well being while working with children with cerebral palsy at the Brain Research Institute. In 2008, Jill began *Holistic Circus Therapies* with the vision of empowering communities worldwide towards holistic health. Her skills as a performer, community circus trainer, mental health worker, project manager, program evaluator, and occupational therapist provide the tools needed to address the diverse needs of populations that can benefit from community circus intervention. Jill has international experience directing, producing, and performing art pieces that combine multiple disciplines of dance, circus, and theatre with young people of varying abilities and social pressures. Jill is involved with circus intervention research and is published in the Australian Journal of Occupational Therapy for her innovative work on community circus and life skills acquisition. Jill has pioneered the use of circus within the field of occupational therapy for a variety of populations and initiatives, including; mental health,

special needs, community development, international outreach, Indigenous, and newly arrived backgrounds.

### ***Occupational Therapy***

Occupational Therapy is concerned with occupation in relation to health. Health is viewed in occupational therapy as more than the absence of disease, and strongly influenced by what people do in everyday life (CAOT, 1999). Although occupational therapy is a very broad and diverse profession, occupational therapists share the belief that engagement in activities, which provide a mix of challenging and achievable tasks, promotes health and well being among individuals and communities. The occupational therapy sector continually tries to use innovative and creative ways to help clients achieve balance and greater sense of wellbeing in their lives. Occupational therapists work with a variety of people with limitations in physical, cognitive, and emotional functioning. The benefit of combining circus and occupational therapy lies in its ability to enable increased function in these areas with activities which focus on coordination, body awareness, team work, problem solving, perseverance, fitness, strength, and life skills acquisition, and most importantly, FUN. Circus as a discipline provides a variety of experiences and activities, which facilitate positive emotional, physical, and mental health outcomes (Maglio and McKinstry, 2007). Occupational therapy and circus promote a better quality of life using the experience of play, fun, and creative expression.

### ***Benefits***

Circus as a discipline provides a variety of experiences and activities, which

facilitate positive emotional, physical, and mental health outcomes (Maglio and McKinstry, 2007). Occupational therapy and circus promote a better quality of life using the experience of play, fun, and creative expression.

***Emotional Health*** Interacting in appropriately pitched circus activities promotes wellness by teaching turn-taking, leadership, communication, empathy, expression, trust, and dependability. Grading of tasks individually to have a combination of challenging and achievable components promotes feelings of motivation and satisfaction in engagement, as well as increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. The engagement in circus activities can also provide respite or distraction from one's current state of stress or mental instability.

***Physical Health*** Circus skills can be graded to enable success from people with a wide variety of physical and mental capabilities. Many activities used in circus increase body awareness, coordination, circulation, strength, and flexibility all within a fun filled environment.

***Cognitively*** Circus works the brain! The varied activities, equipment, and structured repetition, provide individuals with multiple activities that increase gross and fine motor control, sense of rhythm and timing, reactions, coordination, bimanual hand use, and concentration.

***Social Health*** Circus skills assist in the formation of healthy peer interaction as well as provide opportunities for teamwork. Traditionally in circus there is a role for everyone. By utilizing an occupational therapy approach, an important part of this program is focused on highlighting each individual's strengths. Everyone is recognized and

valued by other members of the group. The “life skills” learned emotionally, cognitively, and physically, all contribute to how individuals function socially and their ability to contribute to solid communities.

Most importantly, circus is FUN! Individuals are improving their function while engaged in play. A variation of activities provides choice and an opportunity for everyone to find an activity they enjoy engaging in. Individuals experience enjoyment engaging on their own and as part of a group.

### ***Recent Projects***

*REACH*- Restoring Empowerment Across Cultures and Humanity, is a branch of Holistic Circus Therapies that comprises four professionals and innovative leaders in the Australian circus community. *REACH* toured Cambodia in 2009, using circus and performing arts to help strengthen communities.

**March 09, Phare Ponleu Selpak, Battambang**

**April 09, Epic Arts, Kampot**

**May 09, M'loptapang, Sihanoukville**

*REACH* aims to promote a better quality of life for individuals of varying mental, physical, and emotional capacities within developing countries. The experiences of play, fun, creative expression, and sustainability are inherent to all *REACH* programs

- Increase participation and access to the arts for individuals with all abilities.
- Address the unique health and wellbeing needs of individuals and communities.

Programs are inclusive of people eligible for special services within the areas of social, physical, cognitive, and emotional, and community health. The programs are also suitable for individuals and communities who are not eligible to receive special services but who may also benefit from circus programs. This includes but is not limited to marginalized communities, the education sector, health promotion, and community building initiatives.

### ***Organizational Objectives***

To assist young people to be empowered within their school and community by increasing participant's physical, emotional, and mental health through engagement in community circus activities.

### ***Short Term Goals***

1. Provide a fun, motivating, and intrinsically reinforcing experience
2. Increase positive risk taking physically and emotionally, in a safe and supported environment.
3. Promote physical health and body awareness through activity.
4. Enable participants to acquire a broadened skill base relating to circus as well as more generic “life skills” (i.e. problem solving, giving and receiving physical and social support, verbal and non verbal communication and leadership).
5. Increase self-confidence and self-efficacy.
6. Improve social connectedness and teamwork.
7. Create a space in which participants feel a sense of belonging.
8. Work towards sustainability, opportunities for continued training skill enhancement
9. Ensure program is sustainable and responsive to changing needs,

circumstances, and recommendations made throughout the duration of the program.

### Long Term Goals

1. Participants take increased responsibility for their own physical wellbeing, their own learning, relationships with others and role in local, national, and global community.
2. Participants are able to apply skills and knowledge gained within the program in multiple ways throughout their future.
3. Participants have a greater understanding of the various roles that exist within circus arts, which provide a vast range of options for future involvement.
4. Participants use skills to continually increase their capacity to design, create, and evaluate processes as a way of developing creativity and innovation.
5. Participants are aware of various ways in which people can think, communicate, conceive, and realize ideas and information.

Workshops incorporate a mix of theatre/clowning games and activities, a warm up, a variation of manipulation activities (juggling, hula hoping, poi and staff spinning), Acrobalance (human pyramids), and if possible, aerial training.

All Activities are introduced in a way that enables a balance of challenging and achievable tasks for all participants, to

encourage increased self-confidence and perseverance.

For more information about projects and research completed on Circus and Life Skills Acquisition, please visit [www.reach4relief.com](http://www.reach4relief.com)

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## “Not Even Wrong”: It’s Right to Be a Sensory Friendly Live Drama Show

Mandu

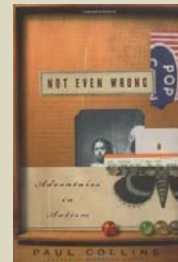
On the evening of November 12, 2009, around 100 people on the spectrum, along with 300 other audience members, went to a theatre to enjoy a sensory friendly live drama show “Not even wrong”. During the post-performance sharing, a young man said “The play was a complete reflection of my past. I wish all students and teachers in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong could see this play.” In the questionnaire, another audience member responded “Both my mum and I left with tears in our eyes.” The Honorable KC Cheung, a Legislator in Hong Kong, said in the questionnaire, “The play hit the theme and made people understand some behaviors of people with autism. It also brought out the issue of respect. ... This ‘sensory friendly’ show allows the people with autism to enjoy drama like ordinary people. Other people could also understand more about people with autism during this show.”

### The non-fiction book “Not even wrong”

In 2007, Eva<sup>1</sup> handed me Paul Collin’s book “Not even wrong”. “You must read this.” She said. I read the book and was deeply touched.

The main “story” line is about Paul Collins and Morgan, his 3-year-old boy with classical autism. In his book, Paul Collins also made references to many people with autism, or *suspected* to be, including many famous people in the history like Newton, Einstein, Mozart and many others.

Paul Collins mentioned one particular autistic *suspect*, Peter the wild boy, in great details. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, people discovered Peter in the forest of Hanover. When Peter was found, he was basically naked, except debris of collar around his neck. He had no speech, did not respond to verbal instructions except the cracking of walnuts: If you crack walnuts in the next room, he would rush in and ask for walnuts.



*The non-fiction book “Not even wrong”*

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? If we see a boy with such characteristics, we may suggest sending him for an assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Eva SY Lai is the wife of the author Mandu. She is an educator dedicated to serve the people on the spectrum

The Hanover people caught Peter and gave him to the British emperor, King George I. The king then took him to London, and asked John Arbuthnot, a famous scientist and physician at that time, to educate the boy. Eventually, Peter was sent to the Harrow School. However, his education in the traditional and strict Harrow School was a total failure – not a surprise to us, isn't it?



*Paul Collins, acted by KC Li, has a boy with autism*

Two years later, an obituary of Peter was published in the British Journal. Actually, Peter did not die at that time. He was sent to a farm in the countryside and lived there peacefully for another 60 years.

In the modern time, after Morgan was diagnosed to have autism, Paul Collins' only hope was that one day Morgan would call him "Daddy". Morgan inspired him to look back into his own life when he was young and found that he had many characteristics similar to Morgan's.

The last chapter of the book was subtly touching. A friend of Paul took Morgan to a supermarket and met Paul there. Paul got something to do, said goodbye to Morgan and left – usually Morgan would have no reaction to daddy's departure, and he would not expect anything to happen. When he was passing by the cashier of the supermarket, he heard a small boy crying, "Daddy! Daddy!" It was Morgan!

### **The play "Not even wrong"**

In 2008, I wrote a new play "Love in the time of California epidemic". The play was about the controversial biomedical approaches related to autism and environmental factors. During the rehearsal period, I recommended Paul Collins' book to the artists and mentioned that I intended to adapt it into a new play.

A few months later, HF Wu, a lecturer of the Department of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts and a long-term partner of mine, who went to UK for further study sent me an e-mail, "Yes, it's a very good story, let's adapt it into a play!"

HF Wu wrote to the publisher of the book “Not even wrong”, the reply was a yes. Paul Collins granted us the approval free of charge to adapt the story into a Cantonese play. We were encouraged and excited.

So I started to write the play. The modifications or adaptations I made mainly include -



*John Arbuthnot in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, acted by KL Cha, frustrated in finding the way to educate an autistic boy, just like Paul Collins in 21st century*

1. I change John Arbuthnot as the leading character in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I did some research. John Arbuthnot existed in the era of changes. His father was a Catholic father who was excommunicated by the church because he did not accept the British emperor to be the head of the church. The elected parliament seized most of the political power from the royal family during John’s life time. In my adapted play, the royal family asked John to educate Peter in order to prove that Peter was a human being. The failure of Peter’s education in Harrow School made John very frustrated. The fact that he was serving the Christians that excommunicated his father further complicated his emotional reaction.



*“If you do not love Peter, how could you educate him well?” Isaac Newton, acted by John Ip*

2. I added the character of Isaac Newton who served as a mentor image to John Arbuthnot. One of the important discoveries of Isaac was that a prism would diversify a beam of white light into a spectrum. He asked John why Rene Descartes wanted to study rainbows. While John was finding an answer to Isaac’s question, Isaac gave a very simple and straight forward answer, “Because he loved the rainbow!” Then Isaac said, “If you do not love Peter, how could you educate him well?”

3. I changed the personality of Paul Collins. Just like the way John Arbuthnot treated Peter, he was too eager to change Morgan. His efforts were a total failure. He read many books and searched a lot of information about Peter. Finally, the story of John

and Peter inspired him: Morgan should take the lead in his own education.

4. In the real history, Peter was sent to the countryside by Princess Caroline, who later became the queen of England. In my adapted play, I changed it to that John Arbuthnot was the one who deliberately put the obituary of Peter in the British Journal and sent Peter to the countryside.
5. I changed the last scene to take place in the graveyard of Peter. In that scene, Paul Collins found that there was a 60-year difference between the year of Peter's death on the grave stone, and the time of the obituary in the British Journal. Paul Collins concluded that it was John Arbuthnot who arranged all these for Peter. While he was trying to clarify this matter, Morgan was crying and looking for him. It was the first time Morgan called Paul "Daddy".



After Peter was seized from the forest, he was portrayed by a puppet (Left). After Morgan was labeled as autistic, he became 'virtual' (Right).

6. We used three different ways to portray the boys with autism. We used a real child actor to act Peter before he was seized and Morgan before he was diagnosed. At the moment Peter was seized, he turned into a puppet, and at the moment Morgan was diagnosed, he turned into a virtual character – the adult actors / actresses were acting towards a "virtual" Morgan which did not

actually exist on the stage. All the voices of Morgan were imitated by an actress standing at the side of the stage at the sightline of the audience. At the end, when Paul was enlightened by Peter's story and realized that he should treat Morgan in a humanistic way, Morgan was changed back to a real child actor.



The year of death on Peter's grave stone was some sixty years later than his obituary on the British Journal

In Hong Kong, most of the drama productions can only survive with financial assistance due to various reasons. We firstly got a grant of moderate size from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. It was, however, far from enough. I put up a note on my web site and contacted some organizations to ask for help. Then we got another moderate grant from the Hong Kong Society for Child Health and Development and another personal donation, thus making the production possible.



*The publicity poster*

Happily we had our play “Not even wrong” on stage at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in mid-November!

### **The sensory friendly drama show “Not even Wrong”**

In late September, I attended a meeting of the Hong Kong Autism Awareness Alliance (HKAAA). I mentioned the play. Dr William Fan, the chairman of HKAAA and a senior psychiatrist, responded with great interest. He proposed and the board approved to have one of the shows to be a charity show for HKAAA. Upon further discussions, the board, taking reference to the success of the ASA AMC sensory friendly movie shows, decided to arrange the charity show into a sensory friendly show.

The horn was blown and the whole community of “autism” was mobilized. Dr Fan was the commander-in-chief. A very senior social worker serving people with autism promised to take care of the auditorium, while another young and bright social worker promised to take up the cueing of sensory display boards. Also, a mother took up the ticketing work with powerful support from a parents’ organization.

We did not have a very clear idea of how a sensory friendly show should be. We put our heads together and decided to implement the following sensory friendly arrangements-

1. House light: When the stage is blackout, the whole theatre will be darkened. The sudden darkening of the theatre may irritate some people on the spectrum. Moreover, they may get up and roam around the slanted auditorium in darkness, which will be very dangerous for them. Sealing up the screaming mouth of the lighting designer with adhesive tapes (actually she did not scream at all and in full support of the arrangements - it’s only a joke) and disregarding the weakened stage effects, we kept the house light level at 30% on during the whole performance.

*Silence**Sit calmly*

*Samples of visual cards used by the auditorium team*

2. Noises and movements in the auditorium: When people on the spectrum get overwhelmed, they might start making noises. Some even generate noises involuntarily. Some would squirm in their seats, stand up and make noises along with the performance. We instructed the house staff not to interfere with the audience. As mentioned, a senior and experienced social worker headed an auditorium team of 10 volunteers, comprising of professionals like occupational therapists, speech therapists and clinical psychologists to support people on the spectrum during the performance. Our direction was not to interfere unless necessary. People on the spectrum could be largely themselves. They were allowed to get up and roam around the auditorium. Also when the situation became uncontrollable, we respected the decision of the parents whether their children should stay in or leave the auditorium, and the way the support team should help their children calm down.



*We made 5 sensory friendly reminder boards. The man in the photo is Mandu, the author.*

3. Sensory friendly reminder boards: In the play, there were some sound and light cues, and scenes which were frightening, such as those involved crying or beating. As it was a live performance, some of the arrangements in sensory friendly movie shows might not be applicable. We designed some visual reminders to help people on the spectrum and their parents to prepare for the upcoming occurrences. We prepared some sensory friendly reminder boards, including “Frightening scene”, “Black out”, “Sound effect”, “Crying” and “Beating”. As mentioned, a social worker led a team of 4 other volunteers to manage the boards. As the stage was an arena with audience sitting around it on 4 sides, the 4 volunteers sat at the four corners at the edge of the stage. The team leader, who was in the control room, called out cues through walkie talkies so that the volunteers could put up the boards in advance of the scenes that might be irritating to the people on the spectrum. They would get prepared and the parents might remind their children in advance.

4. Demonstration: Before the show started, I went on stage and explained to the audience about the sensory friendly arrangements. We also demonstrated some stage cues like black out and the use of the sensory friendly reminder boards.
5. Interruption of the show: We gave instructions to the actors, actresses and production staff that if the show was interrupted, we would pause the show and resume when the interruption ceased. When the production manager considered it necessary to pause the show, he would turn up the house lights, and the cast would know that this was the cue to pause the performance.

The arrangements were prepared in a conscientious manner. All the distribution of manpower was documented and discussed. All the procedures on the show day were pre-designed and walked through, and all the necessary sensory friendly cues on the stage were discussed, marked and rehearsed.

The ticket sales made us worried. Only a handful of tickets were sold a week before the show. Dr Fan wrote an e-mail to organizations and people concerned about autism in Hong Kong. I was so busy in preparing the sensory friendly arrangements during those days, and did not even have the time to ask for updated position before the show. In the afternoon of November 12, a few hours before the charity show, I hosted a post-performance talk after a school show (we had afternoon shows specially reserved for schools in weekday afternoons). I told the participants that we had a sensory friendly show that night, and asked the participants to help asking more people to come to support the show. Suddenly, I saw Gladys, our producer, making exaggerated gesture to me: the show had been sold out! What a wonderful surprise!

The show went on wonderfully “smooth” as planned. The house light was brought up to 30%. Despite exposing some of the stage tricks, the audience understood and did not mind at all. We could hear continuous noises from the audience. The cast had to raise their voice a bit. This might be stressful to their vocal cords, and might affect the shows on the coming days.

One teenage boy showed keen interest in the stage and the performance. He went on the stage three times. I sat next to the production manager. Whenever this boy stood up from the audience, he called through intercom calmly “House light stand by.” If the boy went on the stage, he called, again very calmly, “House light up!” Then the cast stopped acting and froze in the position they stopped at. The volunteers moved to the stage and waited quietly. During all the three interruptions, they did not say a word, but just used body language to pursue the boy to leave the stage. After the boy had left the stage, the production manager said, calmly of course, “House light down!” and the show continued.

In one occasion, an actor was at a very high emotional scene and he was speaking his key and punch line. The boy went to the stage at that critical moment. The production manager also ordered “House light up!” The actor, however, obviously did not want to stop. The production manager and the volunteers were a little puzzled about what should

be done. Then I stood up and said, “The actor please pauses!” The actor paused at the middle of his emotional speech, held emotional gesture in a fairly strange and awkward way. After the boy left the stage, the performance went on. I heard a sigh of relief from the production manager.

During all these happenings, what touched me most was the audience’s response: They just sat calmly and silently in the auditorium. Their calmness and silence were the greatest support to us. Ladies and gentlemen, this is what we call acceptance! Near the end of the show, I could not help having tears running in my eyes.

At the end of the show, I was called on the stage at the curtain call. I said, “I am so excited tonight. Firstly I have to thank all my partners in the drama field. Without their patience and acceptance, this sensory friendly show would not be possible! May I suggest a long applause to them?”



*Without the patience and acceptance of these artists, this sensory friendly show would not be possible. Thank you! The 5<sup>th</sup> (from right) at the back row is HKWu, the director.*

The response from the audience was kind and marvelous. After the show, we had a brief post-performance talk. A young man stood up and said, “The play was a complete reflection of my past.

I wish all students and teachers in the primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong could see this play.”

We received hundreds of questionnaires after the show, more than 99% of the questionnaires responded positively. A girl responded in the questionnaire, “Both my mum and I left with tears in our eyes.” The Honorable KC Cheung, a Legislator in Hong Kong, said in the questionnaire, “The play hit the theme and made people understand some behaviours of people with autism. It also brought out the issue of respect. ... This ‘sensory friendly’ show allows the people with autism to enjoy drama like ordinary people. Other people could also understand more about people with autism during this show.” I was also deeply impressed by one comment from a mother, she said, “I am greatly touched! Thanks to the hard work of the production staff and put the real situation of autism on the stage. I especially liked the performance of the puppet. I am a mother of a 35-year-old young man with autism. We walked through a long way. He still cannot speak today, but can use different ways to express his meaning. Our life is colorful because of him.”

## The way forward “Not even wrong”

We heard numerous requests from the audience suggesting us to re-run the play. Amongst them there were two fairly concrete proposals-

1. One parent, who is the boss of a public relationship firm, told me that he would try to get funding for us to re-run the play.
2. The chairlady of the Federation of Rehabilitation of Canton, a quasi government body in a southern city of mainland China, came to see the sensory friendly show and was deeply impressed. She asked us for lunch the other day and proposed to re-run the play in the Canton Province in Putonghua in 2010.

There will be huge difficulties for re-running the play in Hong Kong in Cantonese and even much more difficult in the Canton Province in Putonghua. However, the proposals themselves have already been a great and strong sign of support to us.

The sensory friendly live performance is one great step forward. I wish there would be growing awareness about the needs of people on the spectrum and their families, and a desire to make sure they have opportunities for activities in public places that most families take for granted. Also, I wish there would be more and more adaptations in public places for people on the spectrum.

Public ed

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*At the end of this article, I wish to bring up the view of a gentleman during the post-performance talk after the sensory friendly show. He said that he did not feel comfortable in this show because we were asking the people on the spectrum to follow the so-called norms of “normal” people – They were required to keep quiet and sit calmly during the show, although in a much looser standard. The whole setting of the show was modified from a show for “normal” people, not specifically for people on the spectrum. He said that we should put them on stage and get rid of all these so-called norms of “normal” people.*

*My response to him was a “yes” in the first place and a “however” later.*

*Yes, we should put the people on the spectrum on the stage. Eva, my wife, and I did put over fifty children on the spectrum on the stage this year directly or indirectly.*

*However, we should also arrange sensory friendly show like this, allowing people on the spectrum and their families to come to the theatre and enjoy shows designed and set up for “normal” people.*

*There is no conflict between both events.*

## Book Review of *Drawing Autism* by Jill Mullin

Parasuram Ramamoorthi

*Drawing Autism* is a welcome addition to the knowledge bank on autism as it helps young people showcase their art work and tell others: “look we can do it”. It is an encyclopedia of artists around the world who have demonstrated their visual/spatial power. It is quite heartening to see many artists from India, Singapore and other Eastern countries represented in the volume. Congratulations to the Editor for the wonderful job of bringing the world closer. One can see that Autism has no border issues and boundaries.

The format of introducing each artist is quite significant:

At what age did the act of creating art enter into your life?  
 Why did you start creating art?  
 What inspires/excites you about creating art?  
 How do you choose your subjects?  
 Do you think your art helps others understand how you view the world?  
 Who are some artists that you like?  
 What was the inspiration for each piece of art that you have submitted to *Drawing Autism*?  
 Anything else that you'd like to say about your artwork?

Through this meaningful way of introducing the work of each artist, Jill Mullin, a behavioural psychologist and the editor of the profound volume, speaks of her experience in collecting art works from individuals on the spectrum ranging from 9 to 60 years and across

continents. She was inspired by Glen Rus a young artist at a residential group home in New York who would draw passionately every day and would be proud to show his work to Jill Mullin. His drawings adorned Jill's kitchen and Jill began to think of the project *Drawing Autism*.

I would pick up some of the answers to the questions posed by the editor from different artists to show how autism has defined their art, not crippled their art. For instance Donna Williams the celebrated Australian artist says:

*“I would twinkle my fingers to internal music, which would later become composing. I was taught one drawing at age 3 and did only the same drawing until age 9. But then suddenly I drew the plastic cows of a classmate and that’s all then I drew until age 13. Then I drew my father’s tattoos and trees with eyes. I was terrified of artistic expression because of acute exposure anxiety but began to paint in my 20s. I began typing letter strings around age 9 and by age 13 had sprung forth poetry and by my 20s I was a singer-songwriter”*

Jonathan Lerman answered that he needed an emotional outlet; so he started painting (*The Drawings of a Boy with Autism*). Vrinda Chaswal a young girl from Delhi has fixations with water tanks. Right from the age of ten she started painting water, sky, houses with doors and windows. Zoe Kakolyris would paint because she likes it.

To the question what inspires your art, Caryn Schlosser says: "I always have a camera with me. When my friend invited me over to her house for the first time there was a scene that really caught my eyes as I walked from the car to the house. It was a stream with trees in their autumn color. I thought it was breathtaking." Noah Schneider's painting on *David and Goliath* was an inspiration from the Bible.

Stephen Mallon, an architect and 3-D designer diagnosed with autism late in life states:

*"Most of my concepts came from dreams, either while sleeping or daydreaming...some concepts recur and give me no peace until I have found some way to express them, even if the expression doesn't happen until years later. Concepts are usually freshest early in the morning, but the demands of the day usually crowd them out. Those concepts that can endure until an evening when I am free to work are usually the ones that find expression."*

Esther Brokan said that she goes public with her art so that it can increase awareness about autism and awareness of the talent that exists in many on the autism spectrum and she wants the world to encourage these talents. David Berth answered the question *do you think your art helps others to understand your view in a positive way* by saying "Sometimes it does. When I draw situations, people understand that the animal in my drawing is me. Sometimes though, my drawings make the distance between me and the outside world bigger, because the objects of my fascination are not always socially accepted." (Vampires, war scenes, etc.)

James Kinneally likes any artist who paints buildings though he does not have a particular fancy for any artist. Many have drawn from their own mind and do not have models to imitate. Zach Hamm answered cryptically when asked what else he would like to say about his art: "I want you to see that I am happy with the way that I am. When you see me I am always the same....My house is always the same too. I like me .And I like my life in the house." (He likes to paint houses)

The introduction by Dr. Temple Grandin speaks about her interest in painting right from childhood and how her mother encouraged her to draw pictures that others would want to see. Dr. Grandin also speaks about childhood fixations and how children on the spectrum often get fixated with certain objects and draw the same thing, a kind of repetition which she wants to be channeled through painting. She used to draw horses and different images of horses while in elementary school. Dr. Grandin speaks of three types of autistic minds, 1) the visual thinker whose artwork is photorealistic, 2) pattern thinkers who are capable of abstract-visual thinking. Their art work is abstract and impressionistic. Donna Williams is a good example of this type of pattern thinking, and 3) the word-specialist mind. These people are good with words and not so much with painting and arts. Finally Dr. Temple Grandin suggests that "ability has to be nurtured...parents, teachers, doctors and everybody who works with individuals on the spectrum need to help these individuals develop their abilities"

What I find particularly enriching about this book is the hope that it instills in

every child/young person/adult and even an old man (someone started painting at the age of 40) that they can do painting or some other art form that engages their artistic-autistic mind.

The book is in 7 chapters and paintings are classified on the basis of themes and it is a kind of encyclopedic work that every school or home that deals with Autism should possess.

Some prints are too fine for the reader and care must have been taken to have a more visible print. Sometimes I had to strain my eyes to read the name of the

Painter. This is of course a minor shortcoming of the book.

I recommend this book to all parents, teachers and caregivers concerned with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

(This book is available at <http://markbattypublisher.com>)

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