

Raising the Ambition: exploring possibilities for autistic artists to thrive in Scottish theatre.

Or, (as written by Limitless workshop participants): ‘Allowing people’s ideas in art to be offered’

Executive Summary

This report outlines research that investigates the barriers preventing autistic artists entering into, and thriving in, theatre (industry and training) in Scotland. It was commissioned by the Royal Conservatoire Scotland, with additional funding from Inspiring Scotland. The research was conducted by Ellie Griffiths, in conjunction with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS), the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) and the National Autistic Society (NAS). Autistic artists in their teens, twenties, thirties, forties, fifties and sixties contributed to the data and insight, there is however a principal focus on the barriers facing emerging artists. The research identifies four key barriers:

1. Access to professional training
2. Travel and unfamiliar spaces
3. Mental health and wellbeing
4. Building professional networks

From these, actionable recommendations are presented to provide both the Royal Conservatoire and the National Theatre of Scotland with strategies to increase their support to artists on the autistic spectrum¹.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the young artists and theatre professionals on the autistic spectrum, who shared their experiences and insight. We would also like to thank Imagine, Skills Development Scotland, and Access All Areas. Finally, this research would not have been possible without Inspiring Scotland, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the commitment of the partner organisations.

Research Need

The employment rate of neurodivergent artists working in the professional theatre sector in Scotland is hard to quantify. Little has been documented in this area. However, it is interesting to observe that each piece of published research catalogued in the National Autistic Society library², featuring both autism and theatre, has an educational, or therapeutic agenda. This absence may hint at a societal predisposition to place the autistic individual as ‘learner’ or ‘patient’, rather than employable contributor to society. It is notable that autistic actors are not necessarily considered for autistic roles highlighting a need for arts career pathways to be scrutinised in terms of access. Similarly, the ‘Barriers to Access’ report (Lawrence, 2016), remarked on a “*dearth of disabled and D/deaf people on*

¹ As there is currently much debate in the autistic community about the use of person-first or identity first language, both will be used throughout this report, to stay as neutral as possible

² NAS Autism library: <http://www.autism.org.uk/library>

Scottish stages and screens, as well as in management positions and delivering arts provision to future generations of Scottish artists". The urgency of this enquiry is made clear in 'Disability Media Work', which comments "Research puts the number of characters with disability being portrayed by disabled actors between less than one percent and five percent depending on the definition of disability used" (Ellis, 2016).

In more general terms, the 'Autism Employment Gap' (National Autistic Society, 2016), found that only sixteen percent of autistic adults are in full-time work, as compared with an average of forty seven percent employment for people in other disability categories. When applied to a theatre context, this is unlikely to be because of a lack of aspiration, as the same survey found that one of the five areas that autistic individuals revealed that they would most like to work in was the arts/acting. Viewed through this lens, it raises a sobering question about whether the performing arts industry sector is currently doing enough to support autistic artists, making it possible for them to thrive.

Without creating more opportunities for autistic artists in the theatre sector, it appears that not only are the creative autistic community being under-served and therefore discriminated against, but the Scottish theatre industry is not benefitting from the rich diversity of talent that exists.

Project Background

This report presents findings from the second year of the Limitless pilot project which aimed to explore potential for a creative autistic life, by developing a framework for the engagement of autistic people in creative activity as artists, audiences and participants. The first year of this pilot concentrated on 2 strands of work:

1. Workshops for autistic children and young people

These examined good practice in using drama and theatre methodologies with autistic children, teenagers and young adults. The workshops aimed to:

- Build skills and confidence for artists and staff in the engagement of autistic individuals in creative workshops and in the delivery of drama productions and curriculum.
- Develop a range of methodologies to engage autistic individuals across a series of ages, devising drama and text approaches: try, test and evaluate.
- Test interest in, and approaches to, engagement of autistic individuals in developing work that tells their stories through creative writing, performance and collaboration.

2. The Reason I...

This was a workshop for young autistic adults which developed approaches, expertise and performance ideas to inform a production of *The Reason I Jump*, based on a book by autistic teenager Naoki Higashida. (This is being performed in the NTS Spring/Summer 2018 program).

The aim in year two was to build on this work by making a deeper enquiry into the obstacles facing autistic artists entering the theatre industry.

Research Design

The research explored the following questions:

- How can the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the National Theatre of Scotland be more accessible to autistic artists?
- What are the principal causes of the lack of autistic representation in the professional theatre industry?
- What should autistic-enabling artist development/professional training encompass?

Research was conducted in two distinct phases:

1. Interviews

Four interviews were carried out with mid-late career autistic artists. Context was provided by four further interviews with theatre/autism specialists; including two artist development directors, one careers advisor, and two organisers of the UK's first professional performance training course for adults with learning disabilities. These in-depth conversations utilised a semi-structured design, drawing directly from the research questions. Contributors were invited to select the style of interaction most appealing to them: an email questionnaire, lasting approximately thirty minutes, or a phone/in-person interview, lasting around forty-five minutes.

2. Workshops

Seven emerging artists (age 18-27), engaged in twelve full-day research workshops. Five of the participants identified as having Aspergers, two as having autism. The diversity of needs required a wide range of data collection methods. As Dr Fletcher-Watson comments in his report, 'Enhancing Relaxed Performance', "*The autistic voice cannot be encountered via a single medium and still maintain its diversity*". (Fletcher-Watson, 2018). A mixed-methods approach was therefore used to gather qualitative and observation data. Respect for communication preferences and authenticity of voice were front and centre. Direct and indirect, verbal, written, drawn, group and solo formats were applied.

It is important to note that overall, seventy-three per cent of the contributors to this research identify as being on the autistic spectrum.

Ethical considerations

Safeguarding policies were to put in place to ensure that:

- Contributors understood and agreed voluntarily to undertake their role in the research.
- Contributors had full autonomy in the interviews and recorded discussions.
- Contributors were offered appropriate access and support.

(See appendix A for a detailed breakdown, and appendix B for research limitations)

Findings

Drawing on data from interviews and workshops, four intersecting barriers emerged as prohibitive for autistic artists entering the industry. These are analysed in detail below.

Barrier 1: Access to professional training

Gaining entry into theatre training institutions presents a difficulty to autistic artists, and

artists with other disabilities. In her book 'Disability Culture and Community Performance', Petra Kuppers comments that *"their disability poses a challenge different from and far greater than that faced by a young person within a school system that is part of a universal provision"*. This was illustrated by the experiences of both the established autistic artists that were interviewed, and the workshop participants; none of whom had studied with a respected theatre institute. In an interview with Careers advisor (specialising in autism), Claire Alexander, from Skills Development Scotland,³ she observed there is not an expectation for most autistic pupils, that they will go into paid employment after leaving school. Generally, autistic school leavers are supported to work towards a 'positive destination', be that volunteering or day services. Claire Alexander surmised, *"the reality is that not many people I support go into actual employment. I don't think I have worked with anyone who has gone straight into work"*. This perspective is echoed by research showing that *"Youth with an ASD have poor post-secondary education and employment outcomes. Those with greater functional impairments are at heightened risk for poor outcomes"*. (D Shattuck, 2012). These emphasise how a culture of low expectation may be a contributing factor.

Although some had been on college courses of up to two years, many of the workshop participants expressed difficulty in continuing their arts practice into their adult lives. As one commented: *"What I feel like is holding me down is the lack of experience that I have. I've done a lot of stuff involving acting, but not enough where I'm getting the actual experience of people having taught me. There's only so much you can do on your own"*. This difficulty was clearly having an effect on several of the group's self-esteem and feelings of worth, as one participant reflected: *"I find it hard and a bit depressing to think about my future prospects and look at them in a realistic way"*. This apparent feeling of powerlessness was also expressed in relation to audition processes (none of the workshop participants had been successful in an audition situation to date). One participant described their audition for an institute as *"traumatic"*. Here it may be useful to reflect on The NAS advice, as stated on the employment section of their website⁴ which assert: *"It is important to realise that asking each applicant exactly the same question does not always equate to equality of opportunity"*. When applied to an audition context, it could suggest that alternative, or more supported formats might be needed.

Throughout the workshops, the facilitators⁵ observed that to make the content accessible for all participants, a variety of approaches and formats needed to be used simultaneously. Although autism-specific teacher training may support staff to adapt course content, it could still pose difficulties. As Susan Ann Brand suggests: *"in part because the challenges posed by the necessity to respond to a wider range of learning needs have not occupied a central focus in initial teacher training; in part, too because of the need to accommodate demands at policy level for both high standards of achievement"*. (Susan Ann Brand, 2011). This then suggests a need for both inclusive⁶ and specialised⁷ courses *"where disabled*

³ Interview with Claire Alexander from Skills Development Scotland representative, 2nd February 2018

⁴ NAS website: <http://www.autism.org.uk/> accessed March 2018

⁵ Facilitators were Thom Scullion and Ellie Griffiths

⁶ A course which is open to all, but with reasonable adjustments made to accommodate autistic learners

⁷ An Autistic-only course, catering specifically to those whose needs would prevent them from being able to thrive in the standard course model and format of teaching

people come together and operate on their own terms". (Kuppers, 2011). A notable example of specialised training, is the 'Performance Making Diploma for Adults with Learning Disabilities'. This was designed by Access All Areas in collaboration with The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. This is examined in more detail below:

'Performance Making Diploma for Adults with Learning Disabilities'

Vision: The course responded to the severe exclusion of learning disabled adults situated in the margins, excluded from higher education and by the professional theatre industry. The diploma course (now in its third year), develops a new generation of theatre makers/performers and aims to advocate new performance aesthetics.

Duration: There is a seven-month course, which includes over two hundred and thirty hours of study. Each term consists of two weekly, three-hour classes. There is also an advanced, two-year version which goes into more depth.

Content: Collaborative devised theatre, voice work, improvisation, politics of the disabled body in performance, site-specific work, performance arts, solo performances based on students' lived experiences, professional development, and audition techniques, partnerships and projects with external artists and companies working in contemporary performance. The course culminates in a three-week devising unit, creating performances for a festival (Exit Festival/industry showcase opportunity.)

Audition process: A low capacity workshop, followed by an informal interview. Students are asked to provide information about their access requirements before the audition. Prospective students are invited to see the Exit Festival. A series of transition projects in colleges and in the school holidays are open to new participants, as well as several open days which encourage new students to try out the workshops. All recruitment and selection events are staffed with experienced creative enablers and volunteers and designed to ensure candidates have the time and space they need to be at their best.

Support: Access All Areas work with volunteers and creative enablers to provide support across the course. The course encourages students to use and celebrate the things which make them unique, and the emphasis on devised and autobiographical work means students are able to create performances which are accessible to them as performers.

Graduate support: Access All Areas has a Performance Company and an agency partnership with Simon and How: www.simon-how.com

This innovation has been successful in elevating the expectations of artists and performers with learning disabilities; the partnership with high profile agency Simon and How being a considerable factor in this. One graduate, Cian Binchy (who graduated in 2014), now has two television credits, and has completed an extensive national tour of his solo performance 'The Misfit Analysis', (which won the People's Choice Award at the Vault Festival).

Cumulatively, there is a strong argument that for those with more severe needs, the current selection modes and teaching formats are not attainable and therefore not accessible. For these artists/performers, a reimagined professional training offer, which is designed specifically for autistic learners *"may be the only way for some people to enter the arts, and they should be able to access funding and support to develop models of training and practice that are accessible to them"* (interviewed autistic performer). Without such targeted provision, giving access to high quality, industry-relevant training, it appears that autistic

creatives who are not able to tolerate or access a standard course format, will undoubtedly struggle to acquire training that credibly leads onto employment in the theatre sector.

Barrier 2. Travel and unfamiliar spaces

Travel to and from venues emerged as a consistent source of anxiety for some of the Limitless workshop participants, causing one person to miss five of the twelve working days. This resonates with the 'Barriers to Access' report, which states that "*A major barrier for many of the young people pertained to travelling to and from arts provision*". (Lawrence, 2016) This proved entirely separate from an individual's creative confidence; in the workshops, one young artist who needed a lot of support getting to and from venues, and was nervous orientating new spaces, was happy to perform an improvised stand-up routine in front of the group and guests.

Concerns about arriving in an unknown venue were not restricted to the young artists, as one autistic performer in her forties commented, "*One of my particular traits with my autism is that I can find the idea of travel very stressful; the further or more unfamiliar, the more trouble I have imagining myself successfully getting to the destination*". This is potentially not an exceptional position for autistic creatives, as the NAS website asserts that "*autistic people can find any kind of change difficult*". (National Autistic Society, 2018)." One autistic artist in their thirties commented on their personal coping strategy to combat this by revealing that "*I would probably try to go to the venue myself beforehand to see where everything is so I don't have to ask all the questions when I get there. I don't like asking for help.*" This apprehension is compounded by a lack of targeted access information, putting the artist in the potentially anxiety-inducing situation of having to phone the venue to find out if it will be accessible to them. As the artist continued "*I'd like it if venues could give me more information in advance, or have someone there to meet me to show me around and what I can and can't use. Like how to work the lights or where I can store my belongings*". When reviewing the NTS access handbook with the workshop participants, it was agreed that there was a need for clearer priorities. In this case it was agreed that transport and travel routes were the most important information. Others included:

- Where to go to ask questions, or get help
- A ground plan of the building, highlighting areas that artists are allowed in.
- Detailed information about where to buy food and drinks in breaks
- Outdoor/indoor space that can be used if someone needs quiet time to decompress

This type of information, stated in a visual⁸ and concise format, could prove helpful for first-time autistic visitors.

Similarly, in Devoted and Disgruntled 2017⁹, autistic artist Griffyn Gilligan suggested that organisations should provide the following materials to artists before an audition/rehearsal/event:

⁸ Visual formats are known to be more understandable for some autistic readers. See article on Visual Thinking by Temple Grandin: www.autism.com/advocacy_grandin_visual%20thinking, accessed 10th March 2018

⁹ Devoted and Disgruntled: www.devotedanddisgruntled.com, accessed 10th March 2018. Full notes on the Griffyn Gilligan session can be accessed here: <https://relaxedperformance.wordpress.com/2017/01/17/autism-friendly-auditions>

- Directions to the venue
- Clear and accurate description of what will happen during the session
- Any materials they may want or need to prepare
- Accessibility features of the venue
- A list of who they will be meeting
- A contact for communicating about accessibility needs/answering questions
- Description of the room(s) they'll be working in (size, windows, doors, acoustics, light quality, etc.)

Each of these suggestions are practical details that the Limitless facilitators concluded would help to support the workshop participants when attending an unfamiliar arts space. As one of the participants asserted, *“Everyone has to go out of their comfort zone, I understand that. It’s just got to be built up to gradually”*. A preparation strategy recently implemented at the Autism Arts Festival¹⁰, as described in the festival evaluation (2018), was *“Videos showing routes around the city and campus, in response to statements such as the adult with autism who said, “Theatres are big buildings, and I don’t like not knowing where I’m going”*. (Fletcher-Watson, 2018)

Initiatives such as Shape Art’s Ticket Scheme¹¹, could be a useful reference in tackling some of these obstacles. This scheme ran for over thirty years (in partnership with disability charities, so had time to grow and became a consistent offer). It enabled people with disabilities to regularly gain reduced price tickets to arts events and a free volunteer escort service. This project serviced up to 4,000 trips per year, the regularity and therefore the building of trust, being central to the success of this offer in relation to the autistic community.

These findings demonstrate that travel to, and arriving in an unfamiliar venue is a point of intense vulnerability for many autistic performers/artists. Therefore, the more support personalised support that can be offered (rather than requested), to assist individuals through the process of familiarisation, will be of significant benefit.

Barrier 3. Mental health and wellbeing

A pertinent issue that arose throughout the research was struggles with mental health. This is reflected by research led by Autistica and King’s College London in 2015, which revealed that *“Mental health is the top research priority for autistic people and their families who*

I am exhausted most of the time/I am currently mad at life/I am trying to get my self-esteem back after a few knocks and bumps over the last few years/I am creative but never get round to actually doing it sadly/I am someone who spends too much time on you tube/I am a procrastinator/I am my own worst enemy/I overthink everything/I worry about my future/It makes me angry I can’t talk to people normally/I had some bad moments when I was a teenager, its slowly but surely improving/I can’t say I’m happy the way I am.

¹⁰ Autism Arts Festival (pilot), University of Kent/Gulbenkian Theatre (2017): www.autismartsfestival.org

¹¹ Shape Arts Ticket Scheme: <http://www.theatre-tickets.com/cheap-tickets/shape-arts>, accessed 20th February 2018

want better support for common and distressing problems like anxiety and depression. It continues that *“Almost eight in ten autistic adults will suffer mental health issues”*. (Autistica, 2015) Below are some personal examples of these mental health struggles, taken from quotations by the young artists, that came out of self-reflective exercises in the Limitless workshops:

This type of mentality could well affect an individual’s levels of resilience when navigating a highly competitive industry. As Fiona Ferguson, Creative Development Director of Imagineate commented¹² *“From my role, I see a lot of the challenges artists face that can affect their wellbeing”*. Part of this, is undoubtedly the inherent challenges of project-based employment, as Raynor & Hayward note in ‘Breaking into the Business’, *“an acting career is typically characterised by short-term employment and long periods of unemployment”*. (Raynor, 2009) This shows that not only will the performer/artist continually be in a position of seeking new employment, but also when in employment, will continually be placed in unfamiliar working environments. Add to this, that rehearsal rooms, are extremely social working environments and it becomes clear that this combination can place someone who struggles with social anxiety, at a tangible disadvantage. In Tony Atwood’s ‘The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome,’ he observes that *“not being successful in these areas can lead some people with Asperger’s syndrome to internalise their feelings by becoming self-critical and increasingly socially withdrawn. They may develop a clinical depression as a result of insight into being different and perceiving him- or herself as socially defective”*. (Atwood, 2015) Placed in the context of a busy theatre rehearsal room, such reactions could potentially be misinterpreted as awkward, or inflexible.

One of the established autistic performers, described this type of experience in their interview: *“You are spending a lot of time together in a very intense situation and if you don’t fit in you can get lonely/ostracised and as an autistic you are then trapped in that isolated feeling. There are times when you are not understood, and the stress pushes you to the point of meltdown. Having a meltdown in front of your peers is very shaming; people are not necessarily going to understand or believe that this is an autism thing; they will call you a diva or say you are throwing tantrums. Your meltdown behaviour then stops you networking/applying for jobs because you feel so much shame”*.

This echoes the NAS’s (2016) report on the Autism employment gap, that found that the *“biggest change needed to help autistic individuals get into work is: Support, understanding or acceptance. Working within an organisation that understands autism and where autistic colleagues feel supported is key to this”*. (National Autistic Society, 2016)

This leads to an advocacy of autism-enabling, mental health support being built into the audition and creative process a venue houses. During his Devoted and Disgruntled session, autistic artist Griffyn Gilligan asserted that *“All companies should have a designated support worker who is educated on access and mental health and is Mental Health First Aid trained. This person can liaison with the producer, stage manager, director, and venues, and can handled needs as they arise”*. In his interview, Jon Adams, of Flow Observatorium, was keen to point out that this type of provision is at its best when in the form of peer-to-peer

¹² Interview with Fiona Ferguson, Creative Development Director of imagineate, took place on 1st February 2018

support.¹³

It is clear that mental health challenges can be a significant barrier to autistic artists thriving in the theatre industry. By developing support strategies that include awareness training, designated staff, and prevention/crisis strategies, autistic artists may start to feel more confident that their needs will be met and their mental safety considered when engaging in a process. This aims to combat the burden of responsibility being placed on the artist at points of vulnerability. As one experienced autistic theatre professional described *“it’s often hard for individuals to know what strategies and adaptations might help until someone suggests them, especially if they’re struggling, stressed, or lack self-confidence”*. Peer to peer support and mentoring opportunities may also help support individuals to navigate the inevitable peaks and troughs of working as a self-employed professional in the arts.

Barrier 4. Building professional networks

Self-producing artists, and performers, are continually in situations where it is necessary to promote their own work to gain support and traction. One experienced autistic artist who was interviewed, stated that they felt the biggest barrier to their career progression was: *“The way it works being based on ‘who you know’ rather than ‘what you can do. The way you have to parade yourself around and say: ‘I’m great’!”* These types of challenges are not, of course limited to those with autism, as cited by Oakley, in Blackwell and Harvey’s 1999 observation that *“cultural workers often experience a difficult time post-graduation, as they struggle to make contacts, organise a portfolio, and negotiate (often multiple) work contracts”* (Oakley, 2009). However, the social nature of the standard methods employed to gain industry traction, are likely to create considerably higher obstacles for individuals who have a social disability. As one interviewed autistic artist stated *“They (autistic artists) are not going to go into venues to show them their good work. But if they don’t go into venues or to events where they will be, then it is hard to get their attention. Most emails get binned”*. Fiona Ferguson, Creative Development Director of Imagineate¹⁴ acknowledged the limitations of current artist development models, asserting that *“I think there’s an awful lot of talking and networking for artists before they ever actually get given any money, or get to do their work”*. Cumulatively, this indicates that unless organisations can find alternative means of connecting with autistic artists, many may quite simply go unnoticed.

In standard artist development models, the onus is on the individual artist to approach the venue/organisation. As Fiona Ferguson, of Imagineate, recognised, *“The first step is some type of contact from the artist, usually it’s by email, or being introduced to someone at an event”*. This is reiterated by research commissioned by Camden People’s Theatre, (London), into artist development, which stated, *“It seems generally expected that email will be the first point of call for venues”*, (Nicklin, 2014). In interviews with two artist development directors, it was notable that there was only one example of an openly identifying autistic artist having made such an approach to date. Fiona Ferguson offered some insight into this,

¹³ Interview (by phone) with Jon Adams, founder of Flow Observatorium and writer of the Neurodivergent Arts Manifesto, took place on 16th February 2018

¹⁴ Interview with Fiona Ferguson, Creative Development Director of Imagineate, took place on 1st February 2018

based on findings from the Imagine research project ‘Weren’t You Expecting Me?’¹⁵, (2017), which concluded that *“a lot of things need to be more explicit, not assuming that people know they are welcome or eligible or that we want to talk to them”*. (Fiona Ferguson, 2018) This was echoed by an interviewed artist, who reasoned that *“many autistic people need permission to apply for things, need to be invited. It’s up to the organisation to find us. To ask us to come and play.”* This highlights how making the artist responsible for starting the conversation may inadvertently place insurmountable barriers in the path of some autistic artists. Which in turn makes the case for targeted initiatives that align organisations with groups who have strong links with the autistic community.

Added to this, are the tight circles that the Scottish theatre community creates and operates within. As Fiona Ferguson reflected, *“It’s like anything; we meet people, we connect with them, we like them and ask them to be part of our projects and part of our performances. The problem is we are naturally meeting people like us, so we just continue the status quo by continually bringing the same kinds of people into our work. Whether that is about race or disability or gender”*. This echoes Leadbeater and Oakley’s 1999 study, which found that independent artists *“work in partnerships, networks and clusters, both to acquire ideas, information, contacts, resources, but also for mutual support. Such is the value attached to these networks that the idea has become a core part of government support for the creative and cultural industries”* (Oakley, 2009). In light of this, it is significant that one interviewed autistic artist disclosed that *“my professional networks feel quite small. At certain times, I find it hard to meet other artists. I suppose its approaching people and explaining to them who I am and what I do. It’s easier if they ask me. If I saw someone at an event, I wouldn’t know what to say”*. This sentiment was found to be a commonly felt between almost all of the workshop and interviewed autistic contributors, with many speaking of working mainly in isolation. This was not due to a lack of will to collaborate, it was notable that every person who engaged with the workshop process claimed that the thing they gained most from was meeting the other participants. As one interviewed artist said *“we (autistic artists) want to collaborate”*. This makes a strong argument for the importance of not only supporting autistic artists case-by-case, but also supporting hubs where autistic and neurotypical artists congregate – supporting networks, collaborations and spaces where artists can meet and support one another

Opportunities for emerging artists are advertised primarily via social media and targeted online forums. This then made it interesting, to observe that, although the majority of the workshop participants were highly computer-literate; showcasing their work through media channels such as you tube, none of them had an awareness of where to seek out artist opportunities online. When directed to specific sites, such as ‘Engine Room’ (NTS), many of the participants were not able to navigate and filter out which opportunities would be appropriate for them. One interviewed autistic artist commented that *“I do find it difficult to navigate the industry and find where the opportunities are, and certain opportunities come and go”*. Based on this, it appears that until autistic artists are able to locate the career opportunities they are eligible for, it seems unlikely that any targeted provision or support will reach them.

¹⁵ Weren’t You Expecting Me? Research project (2017) Caroline Bowditch/Imagine: <http://www.imagine.org.uk/artists/projects/expecting-me/>

When seen in overview, the social nature of the theatre industry and its pathways to employment, reveal a significant barrier to those who are autistic and/or have social anxiety. The findings show that this is negatively impacting on many autistic artist's career development. There is then a need to make such marginalised communities aware they are 'invited' and eligible for artist development opportunities, by sign posting relevant information and exploring ways of creating supported opportunities for autistic artists to develop their professional networks.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed in direct response to the research findings evidenced in this report. These highlighted four main barriers to access for autistic theatre artists entering the industry. Each recommendation is both achievable and measurable for the partner organisations to effect change.

1. Further investigate theatre training provision for autistic and/or neurodivergent artists.

This is in order to determine if a specialised, industry-relevant training course would meet the demand/needs of the autistic creative community.

This should be in consultation with

- Scotland's relevant Further and Higher Education providers and learners,
- Neurodivergent theatre makers based in Scotland
- Neurodivergent individuals aspiring to enter the theatre industry/associated education and a broad range of relevant course providers, e.g. Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

This aims to address obstacles evidenced in Barrier 1: 'Access to professional training', which focused on the difficulties of autistic artists who have more severe needs, face in accessing theatre training that was both relevant to them and met industry standards. Without a significant shift in provision and selection process, for many autistic artists there is currently a limitation in transitioning from amateur to professional practice.

Positive outcomes would be:

- Data which demonstrates there is a desire for this type of provision within the neurodivergent creative community
- Evidence of relevant, successful models of inclusive training to inform course design

2. Consult closely with autistic artists to develop and test an amendable access pack which better enables autistic artists to participate in workshops, performances, events and auditions.

The design of the pack should take into account

- Feedback on NTS handbook

This attends to the barriers of travel and unfamiliar spaces, as evidenced in section 2. This detailed the anxiety experienced by autistic artists when navigating arts spaces as a first-time visitor/employee. Without more targeted support in this area, many autistic creatives will not be able to utilise development opportunities which take place in unfamiliar cultural spaces.

Positive outcomes would be:

- An autistic-led steering group enlisted to develop the access pack in collaboration with specialist charities/organisations
- Testing and feedback from wider autistic community
- Investment in the design and production of the materials, with a marketing/distribution strategy attached to this

3. Investigate and develop autism-aware support practices for audition situations and creative processes, to alleviate mental health risks.

These should be informed by

- Autistica mental health research¹⁶
- Griffyn Gilligan consultation services¹⁷
- Mental Health First Aid¹⁸

This recommendation responds to findings which demonstrated that mental health and wellbeing pose a significant barrier to autistic artists working in the industry. For autistic artists to be able to sustain their practices in a nurturing, creative environments, it is vital that there is greater industry awareness, and crisis strategies in place in working environments.

Positive outcomes would be:

- Consultation with both autistic consultants and Mental Health First Aid specialists
- Support strategy design and implementation, including staff training
- Clearly showing to users/artists that these are in place

4. Explore programming/commissioning strands that build the profile and professional networks of autistic artists.

Draw on elements of

- The Autism Arts Festival
- Imagine creative connector workshops led by Carline Bowditch

This aims to address obstacles evidenced in Barrier4: 'Building professional networks', which demonstrated difficulties autistic artists face in self-promotion and therefore gaining industry traction. Without supported showcase opportunities, advocacy and events designed to connect neurodivergent artists with the wider theatre community, many may continue working in isolation, without the support/opportunities they are entitled to.

Positive outcomes would be:

- A series of supported 'connector' events
- Supported showcase/development opportunities for neurodivergent artist's work

Summary

The findings of this research indicate that autistic artists currently face multiple and intersecting barriers to working in the theatre industry in Scotland. This contributes to the *"severe lack of diversity present in the cultural sector"*, as reported by Oakley in 'Art Works' – cultural labour markets (2009). Oakley asserts that *"The solution to this must be a combination of supporting ambition in and knowledge of arts practices in those who*

¹⁶ <https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Mental-health-autism-E-LEAFLET.pdf>

¹⁷ www.griffyngilligan.com

¹⁸ <https://www.mhscot-consultancy.co.uk/scotlands-mental-health-first-aid>

typically aren't represented in the cultural sector. And so, there is a clear need for intervention as a form of 'entry level' support in the arts sector" (Oakley, 2009). This is reflected in this report with a focus on training and industry entry.

Current training and audition formats at specialised theatre institutes provide equitable opportunity and support for some autistic artists/performers. However, for those with more severe needs there is arguably a lack of attainable opportunity. Although exclusive, targeted provision can be viewed negatively as segregation, the findings of this report suggest that for some autistic artists/performers it may be the only accessible pathway to professional theatre employment. This is echoed by one autistic theatre professional who reflected *"I understand that specialised, supported provision might be the only way to enable people with more significant needs. For me, autism is not a disability; for others, it may be very much so"*.

Both interviewed creative development directors, working for arts organisations, commented on an absence of openly identifying autistic artists applying for development opportunities. Further investigation has revealed a culmination of contributing factors: From the interviewed artist's perspective, there was a commonality of severe anxiety caused by travel to unfamiliar arts spaces, which can be difficult to navigate on arrival. Added to this were common concerns around emotional safety/mental health. As one interviewed artist commented, their first response to any artistic opportunity offered to them is *"will it be safe"*? This is not surprising when viewed in context of an industry where *"most of our work, most of the time isn't autism-friendly"* (as stated by one artist development director). From an organisation's perspective, a lack of confidence is leading to an elusiveness of well-developed and consistent accessibility offers. As one experienced autistic theatre professional, commented *"they're (organisations) not sure how to respond or what to offer, feel their knowledge is poor, and are worried about saying or doing the wrong thing"*. The theatre professional went on to emphasise that *"at times the only way to get feedback might be to invite someone to the party and see how they respond when they get there, but that doesn't excuse organisations from making the invitation. They'll (organisations) get things wrong; there'll be egg moments; but they'll learn from it"*. This suggests that to initiate the process of building relationships with the autistic creative community, venues would benefit from being explicit and bold in their access offers, (provided that they have effective feedback systems built into every such initiative.)

Continuing on from this, a low professional profile and lack of networks was found to significantly limit autistic artists' career progression. This calls for what one autistic contributor cited as *"recognition that self-advocacy can take a number of forms. For instance, anyone thinking about working with an (autistic) artist needs above all to see what they do, not how they talk about it, so that's what needs to be facilitated"*. This encourages organisations to develop formats which can actively integrate autistic creatives into the wider theatre community. Findings suggest that the more practical/creative, rather than promotional/networking-focused such formats are, the more accessible this will be to a wider spectrum of needs.

The barriers present the partner organisations with tangible opportunities for positive change, which have been recommended in this report. It is anticipated that these will form

the basis of ongoing conversations with the autistic community. Explicitly offering levels of pitched support, will give autistic artists choices about what will enable them to work most effectively. To conclude, one autistic creative made the comparison of working with a famous actor or director “*whose egotistical behaviour/addictions/excessive pay demands/etc are tolerated because she or he is regarded as a genius when it comes to their art. If we can manage that, we can agree to an unusual way of ‘meeting’ an autistic prospective employee or collaborator*”. The concept of being complicit in unusual ways of ‘meeting’ neurodivergent artists, regardless of how unfamiliar this feels to neurotypical counterparts, crystallises an excellent guiding principle for exploring further possibilities for increased access for autistic theatre artists living in Scotland.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical considerations

- Participants whose intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance might have limited the extent to which they understood or agreed voluntarily to undertake their role:
This was addressed by working through support-worker facilitation as well as the Limitless facilitators checking continually throughout the process that each participant was happy and willing to partake.
- Making sure participants had full autonomy in the interviews and recorded discussions:
Participants were reminded throughout that they could choose to not answer any question and also had the right to withdraw from the research at any time throughout the process. Alternative communication formats were also fully explored to provide a range of ways of enabling authentic responses from each individual. Participants were continually reminded that they were being videoed and their permission was asked for before recording discussions. At each point they were clearly informed that their participation and interactions were being monitored and analysed for research.
- Working with vulnerable adults:
The researcher holds a Disclosure Scotland certificate to work with vulnerable adults and has a background working with neurodivergent artists and young adults. Only the researcher had access to participants' personal information and responses and this information was used for the purpose of the research only. All data was stored securely on a password-protected computer and email account to which only the researcher had access. Any digital recordings were stored safely on a password-protected computer and used only for the purposes of the research. They were permanently deleted upon completion of the project. Participants identities are not revealed in this report.
- Participants access and support:
Participants were invited to bring a supporter or assistant into the workshops. Interviews, discussions and research tasks were flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the group. The facilitators took great care to provide a safe, sensitive participatory environment.

Appendix B: Limitations

- This research focuses solely on the barriers to individuals who are labelled as being 'high-functioning', meaning they can communicate verbally and do not have profound learning impairments. This therefore excludes those with more complex needs who are non-verbal. As the autism spectrum is so broad and varied, it was envisioned that targeting one set of (hugely diverse and wide-ranging) needs, could maximise impact for this group.
- A small sample size limits the breadth of the research findings, compared to larger scale studies. The group of contributors was kept small to allow for in-depth, nuanced conversations and observations, allowing for trust to be built over time.
- This research is autism-specific, rather than representing a wider breadth of neurodivergence or disability.
- There is a focus on autistic artists, not audiences
- Not all areas of the performing arts are explored. Theatre is the predominant focus.
- Although three of the artists interviewed lived further afield in the UK, the main research participants were all based in and around Glasgow.
- The research considers access to specialised professional theatre training, rather than educational models/college courses