

Full Spectrum Access

For many kids with autism, theatre offers customized rehearsals for real life



BY JENNI M. LOER

Michael Paul Levin, left, and Amy McDonald in Stacey Dinner-Levin's *Autistic License*, at Minneapolis's Illusion Theater in 2007.

GEORGE BYRON GRIFFITHS

A CHILD LAUGHS INSTEAD OF CRIES. HE WALKS at eight months. His first words are “Bob Barker!” He echoes words instead of answering questions. Mom and Dad have their suspicions that he might be different, but he makes eye contact and is affectionate. Nevertheless, by the time he is three years old he is diagnosed with autism.

What follows in Stacey Dinner-Levin's autobiographical play *Autistic License* is a plotline all too familiar for parents of children with autism—and that's not a small group. In 1980, one in every 10,000 children in the U.S. was diagnosed with autism. By 2009, that number rose to one in 100. The scientific community cannot yet explain whether this represents an enormous surge in cases, a broader diagnosis or simply an expanding awareness of the autism spectrum. The American Psychiatric Association defines the various manifestations of Autism Spectrum Disorder through a combination of symptoms: lack of eye contact, facial expression, gestures, spontaneous sharing and emotional reciprocation; delay or lack of speech, repetitive use of language and mannerisms; preoccupation with a particular interest, inflexibility in routine.

“You get the diagnosis and the information and the book and you talk to the other parents,” says Minneapolis-based Dinner-Levin, remembering the therapy-packed early years of her son Geordy's life. As a former case manager for children with special needs, Dinner-Levin found no shortage of failed treatments.

In *Autistic License*, the characters live through the telltale

signs of autism, the crushing diagnosis and the struggle toward acceptance. They seek support groups, occupational and speech therapy and educational assistance. In real life, Dinner-Levin's breakthrough was surprisingly linked to her own theatrical background. When Geordy was a third grader, she enrolled him in theatre classes. At his first rehearsals, he stood in a taped-off square to keep from wandering around the stage. Now, at 19, he's performing in community theatre productions. It turns out Geordy shares a passion with his professional-actor father, Michael Paul Levin—a passion that became the only effective therapy for him.

THE PRACTICE OF USING THEATRE TO OVERCOME

the communication and social barriers inherent in autism has been gaining popularity within the last decade. Traditional therapies—speech, behavioral, physical and occupational—conducted in a “pull out” (i.e., one-on-one) manner can teach valuable skills, but don't advance socialization the way contextualized group therapy can. And what better way to naturally transition into real-life social situations than through simulated ones in the safe environment of theatre?

That approach made a lot of sense to Andrew Nelson, a special education consultant in applied theatre. “What does it take to be an actor?” asks Nelson. “You have non-verbal expression, gestures, empathy, being part of a large group, and fitting socially in that group. All those things we learned as actors are what these kids with autism need

help with.” He felt there must be others who shared his theory, so Nelson co-founded an online forum called the Applied Theatre Research and Autism Network (ARTRAN). ARTRAN serves as a virtual roundtable for social service workers, special educators, theatre professionals, therapists, parents and applied theatre practitioners (those who use theatre as a therapeutic tool, but aren’t necessarily licensed therapists). ARTRAN provides an international hub for sharing ideas and techniques being implemented in theatres to combat the disorder.

The majority of theatre classes for autism are geared toward those with Asperger syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism with typical cognitive development. One of the few applied theatre practitioners who works primarily with mostly nonverbal classic cases of autism is India-based Dr. Parasuram Ramamoorthi, co-founder of ARTRAN. Because most autistic children have trouble grasping the concept of play, Ramamoorthi helps to channel their instinctive behaviors by using masks. He estimates a 70-percent success rate in promoting eye contact, a fundamental building block for communication and



MICHAEL BROSILOW

From left, Ashley Winston, John Francisco, Joshua Holden and Carolyn Detrin in Chicago Children’s Theatre’s *Red Kite Project*.

social interaction. By narrowing peripheral vision with the mask’s eyeholes, focusing is easier, and the more fanciful the mask—he’s fond of colorful animal likenesses—the more interested the child.

Dr. Stanley Greenspan, an authority on

the prevention and treatment of developmental disorders in infants and children, has also focused on forms of make-believe as a coping mechanism for autism. With the development of a methodology called “Floortime,” he has become a sort of godfather to the use of

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drama therapy for autism. Rather than forcing the child to modify his or her behavior, Floortime transforms the behavior into play: Flapping hands, for example (a common repetitive motor manner), are reimagined as a flying bird.

Floortime has worked especially well for Elaine Hall, a former acting coach. When her son Neal did not respond to traditional therapy, she turned to Greenspan's approach in order to reach him. "I sought out my theatre crowd," says Hall. "Actors, singers, dancers, writers, creative people—they all had the ability to do something out of the ordinary and join my son's world." After successfully engaging with Neal, the next step was to ease his transition from the playroom to the real world by rehearsing for everyday life events such as going to the doctor or to restaurants.

About 10 years ago, when Neal was around five years old, Hall began teaching a theatre class for children with autism, which would eventually become the Miracle Project, based in Santa Monica, Calif. At the start of each session, the students warm up with yoga and breathing exercises, then dance around to help develop gross motor skills. From there, they use improvisation to create an original musical. The Miracle Project is the subject of the 2008 HBO documentary *Autism: The Musical*, which follows five students and their families through the 22-week program.

Since the release of *Autism: The Musical*, theatre classes tailored specifically for those on the spectrum have popped up all over the country. Inspired by the documentary, for example, Florida Repertory Theatre in Fort Myers has developed a 12-week program for 7-to-11-year-olds. Education director Rachael Endrizzi enlisted the help of Dr. Tina Gelpi and students from the department of Occupational Therapy (OT) at Florida Gulf Coast University. The OT students assist and monitor the participants, allowing Endrizzi to focus on the theatre activities, such as a "jungle walk," in which students may react freely while Endrizzi points out swinging monkeys and other collectively imagined wonders.

Florida Rep isn't the only theatre company working aspects of this kind of therapy into its offerings. At Des Moines Playhouse in Iowa, improvised scenes help teens with autism understand how actions and words can influence the outcome of various social situations. At Phoenix Theatre in Arizona, traditional theatre games—such as "mirror-

Improvised scenes help teens with autism understand how actions and words can influence the outcome of various social situations.

ing" exercises—are repurposed to promote eye contact and focus. And the Red Kite Project at Chicago Children's Theatre offers a sense-engaging and interactive performance for the entire autism spectrum (its next show runs Jan. 20–Feb. 19).

One resource for those developing such programs is the 2007 book *Acting Antics*, by Cindy Schneider, a former autism consultant and a 20-year theatre veteran. The book describes a program in rural Glenmoore, Pa.,

that Schneider developed for children and teens with Asperger's, and outlines games used to practice abstract concepts such as context clues, idiom and humor. Schneider points out that autistic kids must be "explicitly taught" these aspects of communication, which the majority of people absorb instinctually. As for theatre's suitability as a tool, she says, "This was a no-brainer."

"BAMBOOZLE," ONE OF THE GAMES

in Schneider's book, has become a favorite at FacePlace Theater Project, a two-year-old program for older teens and young adults on the spectrum in Marion, Ind. (This past fall, FacePlace also started "junior" classes, and has teamed up with Mandu Shed of Creation in Hong Kong for a parallel study of such classes' effects.) FacePlace is the brainchild of three people from typically unconnected organizations: Christiaan Campbell is a director at a



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special needs social services agency; Christine Bohn is an autism education specialist; and Mark Fauser serves as executive director at the Community School of the Arts, where FacePlace classes are held.

In May '09, a game of Bamboozle kicks off a FacePlace class. Fauser, who leads all the sessions, uses the "Big Three" modes of communication (vocal tone and volume, body language and facial expression) to encourage students to act out a word, usually an emotion, while only saying the word "bamboozle." Misty, one of the most enthusiastic students in a class of eight, volunteers and receives the prompt "quiet," to help her work on vocal variation. At first, she merely mouths "bamboozle," but when urged, she produces the perfect stage whisper.

Kevin, on the other hand, quietly sits in the corner and shows little engagement until Fauser promises to let him rehearse the "ice cream scene" if he participates. Discovering Kevin's passion for ice cream was crucial in getting him involved. "It was like watching the movie *Heidi*, when the old man gets out of the wheelchair," says Fauser. "It was very emotional for us, because Kevin really went



COURTESY OF FACEPLACE

Kevin, center, participates in a class at FacePlace Theater Project in Marion, Ind.

out of his comfort zone." Kevin reads his scene with Amanda, and other than a few memorization glitches, he stays on top of his cues and really grasps the comedic timing.

The founding trio find themselves on pins and needles each class, eager for another *Heidi* moment. And they get closer with

the benefits of each exercise, whether it's improvisation helping develop instincts or scripts cultivating learned behaviors and the subtleties of nonverbal communication.

"They get to practice over and over again," says Bohn. "They've learned that they have to use those 'Big Three' things when

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they communicate, not only when they're acting, but in life."

Even after teaching fundamental building blocks, theatre can continue to provide community and understanding to older students and adults living with autism. ArtStream, an arts programming consortium for communities underserved in the arts in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, launched its adult-inclusive performance offerings in 2006 when the special needs kids outgrew younger programming and no longer had an outlet. Last summer's show, *Keep the Studio Rockin'*, featured a floundering circa-1960 television station desperate to stay on the air. The 16 members of the company—aged 16 to 60, with varied disabilities—developed scenes, songs and their own characters.

Public schools and special-needs not-for-profits are still searching for hard evidence that such therapies are effective. According to ArtStream's Emilia O'Connor, families tend to come to her program to fill in the artistic gap left by more scientifically based public school curricula. But the anecdotal evidence is mounting that theatre is a valid tool for overcoming many of autism's inhibitions. Take Dionysus Theatre in Houston, made up of physically and mentally disabled and able-bodied individuals. "Dionysus has empowered many people," says founder and director Deborah Nowinski, "especially my actors with disabilities. They go on to college, get jobs, get married, they feel they have a voice. They become advocates for other people with disabilities."

Dionysus Theatre has performed at least one original show each year since its inception in 1997, as well as established scripts. Next month, as part of its playwrights' series featuring scripts by or about those with disabilities, Dionysus will mount Dinner-Levin's *Autistic License*. The character of Dinner-Levin's son—played by his father, Michael Paul Levin, in the 2007 premiere at Illusion Theater in Minneapolis—will be portrayed by an actor with autism in the Dionysus production. Nowinski believes theatre grants those with disabilities a life beyond their diagnoses. "It gives them the chance to be labeled an actor," she says, "instead of the label that has been hung on them all their lives." ❧

Jenni M. Loer recently earned her M.A. in arts journalism from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.

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