Quirky dramaturgy in contemporary UK theatre: autism, participation and access

Quirky Dramaturgy in Contemporary UK Theatre: Autism, Participation and Access

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I declare this to be my own original work

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the limitations faced by autistic people in accessing theatre in the UK, and proposes a model of quirky dramaturgy that might expand and enhance the experiences of those autistic individuals. The thesis elaborates quirky dramaturgy as a theory and practice of creating accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence and participation in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. I argue that key features of quirky dramaturgy include relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness and demonstrate their significance across the domains of space, audience, performer and community.

The thesis makes a two-pronged original contribution to knowledge in theatre and performance studies and disability studies by demonstrating how quirky dramaturgy is a theory and practice that artists and scholars can use to think about the ways access can make unique theatrical experiences, and the ways it can be utilised alongside access policies to make more effective and holistic legislation for autistic people. I will show this contribution by pursuing the following three research questions: How does quirky dramaturgy create distinct theatrical experiences for autistic people that improves upon current autism friendly performances?; How does quirky dramaturgy promote self-advocacy and policy reform within the UK for autistic people?; How does current UK arts access policy do enough to help support autistic people? These questions will be informed by quirky dramaturgy made for autistics, UK arts access policy analysis, and the analysis of neuroscientific research into autism.

Chapter 1 will define the term quirky dramaturgy and explain its features of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness. Chapter 2 analyses the relaxed performances of *All in a Row* (Southwark Playhouse, 2019) and *Phillip Pullman's Grimm Tales* (Unicorn Theatre, 2018), exploring the writing of Ben Fletcher-Watson (2015), 'The State of Theatre Access Reports' (2017, 2019) and Jess Thom (2019) to argue current UK relaxed performance practices are lacklustre. I argue through quirky dramaturgy's understanding of relaxedness, spatial access for autistic people can become more diverse and reflective of their experiences. Chapter 3 will examine *Sometimes I Leave* by Vijay Patel (Ovalhouse, 2019) and *All Wrapped Up* by Oily Cart (Stratford Circus, 2020) to critique theory of mind as a theoretical approach to autistic cognition, highlighting its role in making UK theatre etiquette hostile to autistics by creating misconceptions about autistic behaviour in the theatre. Using this criticism alongside the research of Nicola Shaughnessy (2013, 2015), I will show how quirky dramaturgy provides a theatregoing practice that allows autistic people to feel relaxed and be themselves without fear. Chapter 4 looks at Cian Binchy's performance in *MADHOUSE re:exit* (Shoreditch Town Hall, 2018) and Xandri Selwyn's *#Binariesbegone* (Autism Arts Festival, 2019) partnered with the writing of Janine Booth (2016), and the criticism of arts employment policies, I argue quirky dramaturgy ensures creative freedom and support for autistic artists through making performances that [dis]comforts. Chapter 5 will examine the gathering of autistic communities for performances before and during the COVID-19 pandemic through Annette Foster's *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang* (Autism Arts Festival, 2019) and Flute Theatre's *Pericles Online* (2020). Using writing from autistic activists and scholars from the book *Autistic Community and The Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline* (2020), I argue that quirky dramaturgy turns performance events into a hub for autistic people to gather, socialise and self-advocate, allowing communities to choose how they wish to interact and engage with access that is provided to them. Finally, my concluding chapter summarises the features of quirky dramaturgy throughout each previous chapter and reiterates the importance of quirky dramaturgy as a theory and practice that artists and scholars can use to give opportunities to autistic people in UK theatre.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I remember when this PhD project was first approved, very early on in the first few weeks of study sitting in a café reading some articles online on my phone. I had my first supervision with my supervisor Fintan Walsh, and I was in search of something to bring a collective focus to the project. I wanted to draw attention to the mistreatment of autistics within theatre but was awaiting that initial spark that blossoms the original concept into a fully manifest PhD project. And then I came upon an old *Evening Standard* article from 2011 with the headline "Theatre accused of outrageous discrimination' against autistic boy". The article explains how; 'staff repeatedly moved Gregor Morris, 12, around the Apollo Victoria theatre following concerns raised by a "precious sound engineer" during a performance of the West End Musical *Wicked*.'[1] Finally, after much moving, 'The manager then told the Morrises to sit on some steps away from other people'[2] His father felt no option but to take his son out of the theatre after having his son repeatedly discriminated against by staff and moved around the theatre. Within *The Evening Standard* article, Gregor's dad says that;

> Gregor was not flapping or shouting. All I can think of is that he laughed too loudly but it was never at inappropriate moments. I asked to see the manager, queried the complaint and was told 'it was our precious sound engineer' […] I will never forget the look of shock in the faces of people nearby as we were asked to leave, and for the humiliation caused to Gregor.[3]

As an autistic person myself, I found the story deeply upsetting and troubling, more so because growing up I found much refuge both performing and seeing live theatre. It made me begin to think about the rights to access art, and as autistics, our relationship with performance and how it speaks to our experiences. If autistic people are finding difficulty in navigating these theatre spaces because their very identities are being seen as undesirable and disruptive agents, I want to do my part as a

[1] 'Theatre accused of 'outrageous Discrimination' Against Autistic Boy', *The Evening Standard, Homes And Property* (2nd August, 2011) https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/theatre-accused-of-outrageous-discrimination-against-autistic-boy-6428576.html [Accessed 12/01/2022].
[2] Ibid.
[3] Morris, Quoted in, *The Evening Standard*, 2011.

scholar and an autistic person to help create opportunities and methodologies that can help create safe, holistic care and support for autistic people within the theatre that caters to and speaks to our unique and wonderful perception of the world. There seems to be this inherent tension when autistic people enter spaces that are not marked as safe and there is the potential for conflict if someone takes offence to any atypical behaviour. This is also true of an autistic person engaging with neurotypicals in social contexts, or an autistic person in the workplace or seeking employment. As a result, it is important to engage critically and practically with ideas around access, and how we can as activists, autistics, artists and scholars create a structure through which performance events can not only be marked safe, but unique creative theatrical experiences is important to the way I see performance as an autistic, and how I know we can best make appropriate and long-lasting changes in the arts for autistic people within the UK. It is this spark that drives forward this thesis as I lay out the way forward for autistic arts access within UK theatre.

1.1: What is Autism?

The American Psychiatric Association defines Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as 'a neurodevelopment disorder that is characterized by difficulties with social communication and social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns in behaviors, interests, and activities.'[4] It continues that 'While autism is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of impairment in functioning because of these challenges varies between individuals with autism.' [5] These various characteristics and autistic traits described by the American Psychiatric Association are laid out concisely on the NHS's Inform website, giving a simple foundation for understanding the complex spectrum that is autism and the needs it may produce from those living with it:

- the way you use language and talk might be different to most people

[4] American Psychological Association, *Autism Spectrum Disorder,* https://www.apa.org/topics/autism-spectrum-disorder [Accessed 12, 01,2022].
[5] Ibid.

- you may use facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures (hand and body movements) differently to most people
- making and maintaining friendships might be difficult for you
- you may be good at seeing patterns or solutions, and be good at seeing solutions to problems that other people might not
- you might have set ways of doing things, and find it difficult to do them differently
- autistic people are often very good at understanding and working with structured systems, for example languages, music, and computers
- you may have good attention to detail, and be good at spotting mistakes
- you might be passionately interested in certain things, and as a result learn a large amount about them in a short time – these interests can change throughout your life
- you might avoid or seek out certain sensations, like loud noises or specific textures, more than most people, and experience them more strongly
- there might be some foods you particularly enjoy and eat a lot of, and others that you can't be around due to their texture or smell
- when working on projects, you might find it difficult to think about the project as a whole – you may do a great job on your part of a group project, but struggle to imagine how it fits in with everyone else's part
- while autistic people can be good at paying attention to detail, you might find it difficult to leave out details that are accurate but not needed when talking to people or working on projects
- autistic people can be very determined and driven, and keep going with tasks or problems when other people may give up

- you might find you're always determined to make sure things are 'perfect', and sometimes forget to eat or sleep if you're working on something
- it can be difficult for autistic people to work in groups where there isn't clear communication about what they're expected to do[6]

Autism is defined as a developmental disorder and as such these traits and characteristics can vary and fluctuate in relation to the development of the autistic individual from childhood to adulthood. Uta Frith states that;

> symptoms will necessarily look different at different ages. Certain features do not become apparent until later; others disappear with time. In fact, the changes can be dramatic. Autism affects development, and in turn, development affects autism.[7]

This means autism has a broad range of needs or traits that are reactive to development and environment that can make the neurotypical world seem strange and terrifying, while for neurotypicals making autistic behaviour and perceptions of the world appear to be alien and atypical. This often leads to misunderstandings or acts of ableist rhetoric against autistic people that means everyday life can at times be a struggle. For myself my autism was a source of great fear and shame, I felt like I was marked as different and actively sought to mask who I was. Theatre became a refuge and a way for me to slowly come to accept myself, understand how to navigate the neurotypical world, and make close friends along the way. Theatre can be a refuge for many, and this is especially true of the many others like me in the UK who are autistic. This thesis is an exploration of the transformative power of theatre, and why it is so important for autistic people to have the access and support to engage with the arts, so that autistics in this country might be

[6] NHS Inform, *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*, https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd#characteristics-of-autism [Accessed 12,1,2022]
[7] Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*, Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.1.

afforded the same opportunities I had, and so no autistic ever has to feel like Gregor when they go to see a piece of theatre ever again.

1.2: Asperger and Kanner

Autism research is vast, broad, and within the current contemporary contexts, fast moving and ever changing. In this sense, giving a fully comprehensive underlying of autism research would be its own thesis, and thus providing the foundational pillars of autism research and the history of autism will be the most effective means of showcasing the academic dialogues the work of this thesis is placed within. The symptoms and characteristics of autism were thought about as far as pre-enlightenment, as Mitzi Waltz writes, 'the symptoms we now associate with autism were viewed largely through the lenses of folklore and religious belief.'[8] Since then, our understanding of autism has shifted and expanded dramatically. Autism, the growth in its research, and the birth of it social construction can call be rooted back to the work of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. Kanner, as Waltz describes, 'At John Hopkins, Kanner began working with atypical or disturbed children referred to its Harriet Lane Home, including a small number whom he would later differentiate with the label of 'autism''[9] Likewise in Germany Hans Asperger was carrying out similar work, that as Waltz explains, 'saw education rather than talk therapy or medication as the most helpful methodology for working with children seen as having psychiatric conditions, and his critical work therefore focused on remedial education.'[10] As a result, as Waltz develops: 'Asperger was especially fascinated with the 'splinter skills' and high intelligence exhibited by some of his young patients-skills that he may have embellished a bit to protect his institutionalised charges from the Nazi euthanasia programme- so his name is now associated with a specific sub-type of autism without learning difficulties or speech delay: Asperger's Syndrome.' [11]

[8] Mitzi Waltz, *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.11.
[9] Ibid., p.48.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.,p52.

In 1943, Leo Kanner published a set of case studies that took the definitive step towards constructing autism as a distinct entity. 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact' coupled descriptions of several patients with Kanner's ideas about how their behaviours correlated, marking the first use of the terms 'autistic disorder' and 'autism symptoms'.' [12] Kanner's case studies are that of 11 children and the perceived atypical behaviours they exhibited, which form the building blocks from which conceptualisations of autism first began to take shape. Kanner writes within his study that:

> Since 1938, there have come to our attention a number of children whose conditions differs so markedly and uniquely from anything reported so far, that each case merits - and, I hope, will eventually receive - a detailed consideration of its fascinating peculiarities. [13]

The aim of the case studies, as presented by Kanner, is to highlight and group together the atypicality of the observed children, defining these observed traits as autistic. While Kanner brought to the attention of the medical community the idea of autistic people, his research also had many pitfalls which also negatively influenced the ways in which autism was framed and researched within medical circles. Waltz explains that:

> This positioning reduced the likelihood that clinicians would focus on similarities between these children and others they may have observed […]although Kanner described each case as having its own 'fascinating peculiarities'[14], by combining them to define a new syndrome he erased the potentially important differences and accentuated similarities instead.[15]

Waltz argues that the approaches to the case studies used by Kanner, resulted in generalised traits and symptoms for autism that narrowly categorised autistic people as all the same. His focus on the similar traits across all children meant the individualism of each separate child was lost, instead

[12] Ibid.
[13]Leo Kanner, 'Autistic disturbances of affective contact', *Nervous Child,* 2 (1943) pp.217-250 (p.217)
[14] Ibid.
[15] Waltz, p.53.

replaced with a monolithic understanding of autism. This sentiment towards autistic people becomes more controversial with the personal views of both Kanner and Asperger. Both are highly controversial figures due to their views of disability and support for eugenics, with Waltz writing that:

> Asperger, Kanner, and their contemporaries in the first half of the twentieth century operated within the constraints of social beliefs about disability. These affected not only notions about causation and treatment, but also ideas about social status, role and acceptance of those seen as disabled.[16]

Euthanasia and the removal of disabled and mentally ill people from society were commonly held views in regards to care and treatment of those deemed atypical and deemed 'incapable' of 'contributing' to society. This sentiment is evoked in a 1942 issue of the *American Journal for Psychiatry* written by Robert Foster Kennedy, who was at the time also the presidents of the Euthanasia Society of America and the America Neurological Association. Kennedy writes of the need to euthanise disabled people, arguing that:

> We have too many feebleminded among us, something like 60,000, I think, in hospitals of this country, and perhaps five times that number outside. The idiot and the imbecile seem to me unresponsive to the care put upon them. They are not capable of being educated; nor can such defective products be made to be so. Good breeding begets good brains; and with no good brains there can be no good mind.[17]

This extract is deeply disturbing, and frames disabled people not as human beings, but as alien monstrosities to be removed. The disabled child in this instance has no agency over their future, and they are framed as a medical oddity to be probed, examined and discarded. In this regard, Kanner

[16] Ibid.,p.48.
[17] Robert F. Kennedy, 'The problem of social control of the congenital defective – Education, sterilization, euthanasia,' *American Journal of Psychiatry,* 99 (1942) pp.13-16 (p.13).

and Asperger were products of their time and their views were seen as standard practice, despite the grotesquely inhumane beliefs we today might recoil in horror at. Eugenics seeps into contemporary approaches to autism still to this day, with a number of controversial charities such as Autism Speaks advocating for curing autism, while anti-vaccination movements have constructed a disturbing mythology around autism entirely detached from scientific and medical reason. All of these elements together have resulted in negative stereotypes of autism, with research building upon Kanner's approach of generalised autistic traits, resulting in largescale misunderstandings within autism research about how autistic brains actually work.

1.3: The Triad of Theories

Contemporary autism research is primarily rooted in a triad of theories which structure around them the dominant body of work within the field. This triad has had a significant role in shaping the misconceptions around autistic people and the pathologizing of our identities. Damien Milton writes of this triad and its impact, arguing that:

> In recent decades there has been much debate over the ontological status of autism and other neurological 'disorders', diagnosed by behavioural indicators, and theorised primarily within the field of cognitive neuroscience and psychological paradigms. The triad of dominant theories includes theory of mind deficit, executive dysfunction, and weak central coherence theory, as well as behavioural diagnosis and behavioural psychological intervention paradigms; all position autism as a neurological disorder, a pathological deviance from expected functional stages of development. This approach when applied to the education of those diagnosed becomes a 'treatment programme' of modifying the 'autistic person' as 'best one can' to fit in with the mainstream culture of society.[18]

[18] Damian Milton, 'On the Ontological Status of Autism: The "Double Empathy Problem"' *Disability & Society*, Vol.27 (August, 2012) pp.870-878 (p.871).

Milton argues these central theories to autistic research, theory of mind, executive dysfunction, and weak central coherence are less about helping autistic people feel comfortable in who they are and supported, instead focusing on the ways in which theories might hyper focus on difference and how to treat and normalise autistic people to appease neuronormative sensibilities. This is why it is important for me to make my voice heard within this work, and place an importance of autistic subjectivity within research, when we otherwise are silenced and our identities hijacked with harmful research.

Thus, the language of autism is an important part of the ways in which autistic people are framed. Monique Botha, Jacqueline Hanlon, and Gemma Louise Williams write that:

> Real world risks to autistic people are clear, as evidenced by the heightened incidence rates of self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and death by suicide among autistic people, compared to a non-autistic population […] Terminology around autism and, specifically, the language used to refer to autistic people may have a significant role to play in those risks, as language frames concepts, thought, perception and stigma[19]

Language shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and likewise how the world perceives us. How people chose to use language to frame autistic people has real life stakes attached. Fundamental to this discourse is the debate on the use of identity first (autistic person) and person first (person with autism) language. Botha, Hanlon and Williams describe the origins of person first language, with it 'originally designed in the 1970s as a response to the dehumanisation and violence towards autistic and disabled people of earlier decades.'[20] This shift in linguistic approach however did not yield large scale positive change for autistic people, as they continue to write that 'The changes in formulation, historically, have not prevented violence against autistic

[19]Monique Botha, Jacqueline Hanlon, and Gemma Louise Williams, 'Does Language Matter? Identity-First Versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,* Vol.53, Issue 2 (February, 2023) pp.870-878 (p.871).
[20] Ibid.

people which is still occurring despite moving between formulations.'[21] In fact, this shift serves to pathologize autistic people by trying to separate them and autism, and therefore welcoming into the discourse curative languages that seek to erase them altogether. Botha, Hanlon and Williams explain this very point, stating that 'If autism can be separated from the person (a goal of PFL), then metaphors around the destruction of it may be used without consideration for the life attached—autism becomes an opponent, a disembodied force.'[22] As such, I will be using throughout the following chapters of this thesis identity first language to describe myself, and other autistic writers, artists, and theatregoers. It is imperative to shake away curative languages around autism and the pathologizing of our identities and experiences as scientific oddities to be studied and probed. Botha, Hanlon and Williams summarise the importance of identity first language wonderfully, declaring 'The priority of research should be to centre autistic people (both speaking and non-speaking, and with, and without learning disabilities) in the conversation around the language used to describe autism and autistic people.'[23] Therefore, by committing to an identity first language when I am describing autistic people, I emphasise the importance of making the autistic lived experience and my own personal autistic subjectivity focal aspects within my research.

This language also is seen in the very diagnostic language used, and how to describe autism itself. Although autism itself was framed through the lens of functionality, with Asperger's syndrome coming to define autistic people who were considered 'high functioning' (more likely to pass for neurotypical) and autism defining those who were 'low functioning' (unlikely to pass as neurotypical), these definitions have become dated and ableist, and so autism and the broad spectrum it exists upon was consolidated into ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). However, ASD comes with many neuronormative understandings of autism, framing autistic people as other or sufferers of a disease to be cured. ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition) is the term most often used to

[21] Ibid., p.872.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p.875.

describe autism outside medical academic spheres, where ASD is still more commonly used. As people begin to create a shift in the ways autism is viewed and break down misconceptions about autistic people, the concept of suffering from a disorder becomes problematic and ableist. As such, ASC should be the preferred means of referring to autism by medical professionals, as we begin to break away from dated, curative languages, and instead move towards more inclusive languages.

These curative approaches to autism can be seen very strongly in one of the defining and controversial pieces of autistic research of the 1990s, Simon Baron-Cohen's *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*. Frith succinctly summaries theory of mind, one of the triad of dominant theories within autism research, as providing 'us with the ability to predict relationships between external states of affairs and internal states of mind.'[24] This perceived inability to mentalize under theory of mind frameworks has been referred to by Simon Baron-Cohen as mindblindness. For Baron-Cohen:

> Some individuals are so tuned in to their own viewpoints that they are largely insensitive to the viewpoints of others. Such individuals can understand another's viewpoint when it is pointed out, but may not have considered it spontaneously or intuitively themselves.[25]

Within theatre specifically under these paradigms of theory of mind and mindblindness, we might for instance see the autistic spectator as not effectively responding or aligning their emotional response to the mental state of the characters on stage. As Frith develops:

> Instinctive sympathy and the implicit feeling of pity are not a precondition for intention empathy, but the ability to attribute mental states is. When you can attribute mental states, you will be able to understand and can give the right response, even if you do not feel actual distress at the other person's misfortune. On the other hand, when you cannot readily and consistently

[24] Frith, p.77.
[25] Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1999) p.135.

attribute mental states to others, then you will be lost as to how to respond, even if you feel sympathy for the person.[26]

Autistic people within these cognitive contexts are presented as struggling or failing to attribute mental states. In short Frith lays out the core arguments laid out by theory of mind, situating the autistic individual as unable to read or understand the feelings of others. This theory lays out the premise of autistic people as unable to empathise with the fiction of a performance within theatre. However, many autistic people go to the theatre, and enjoy and derive their own affective pleasure from the act of spectating. And the framework of theory of mind is itself problematic as it often falls into broader cognitive assumptions about autistic cognition and identities. This in particular impacts autistic women, who as a result of the prevalence of theory of mind, are often misdiagnosed, as it does not take into account female social masking. Dale Yaull-Smith writes that 'girls with undiagnosed autism are painstakingly copying some behaviour is not picked up on and therefore any social communication problems they may be having are also overlooked.'[27] Autistic women become invisible because of the diagnostic frameworks, and become victims of the broader issues around mentalizing under the logics of theory of mind. After all, theory of mind often presents autism as a set of symptoms that a definitive, and traits are set in stone, that autistic people cannot empathise or understand the thoughts of others. Francesca Happé emphasises this concern within the field of autism research, asking:

If an inability to represent the belief and desires of others (and self) leads to the triad of behavioural impairments which characterize autism, how can it be that individuals exists who pass tests of mentalizing and yet are still autistic?[28]

[26] Frith, p.112.
[27] Dale Yaull-Smith, 'Girls on the Spectrum', *Communication* (Spring, 2007) pp.30-31(p.31).
[28] Francesca Happé, *Autism: An Introduction to Psychological Theory* (London: UCL Press, 1994) p.58.

Happé sets about asking how one might apply such a framework if indeed there are those who do showcase the skills theory of mind suggests autistic people lack. Happé lays out the research in Dermont Bowler's 1992 paper *Theory of Mind in Asperger's Syndrome.* She notes that Bowler:

> found that a sample of 15 high-functioning adults, who had received the "Asperger's syndrome" label, performed well on mentalizing tasks at two levels of difficulty, and were no worse on these tasks than normal controls or schizophrenic adults.[29]

As a result, there is tension and debate within autism research about mentalizing within autistic people, as situating such debates around theory of mind would suggest that autistic people are somehow incapable of mentalizing, understanding empathy, and generally cannot understand other human beings. Theory of mind has since fallen from prominence, with its core principle and thesis disproven as more nuanced understandings of autistic cognition has been brought into the academic literature of autism research. Despite this, theory of mind has a lasting damaging legacy in the ways in which autistic people are treated, stereotyped and mistreated through a general lack of understanding of the diverse ways in which we as a human race are wired neurologically.

Within theatre scholarship, these readings of human cognition create a harmful understanding of autistic theatregoers that frames their perceptions of the world in a neuronormative manner. Theory of mind is often measured against neurotypical cognitive function and rarely situates the ways in which autistic people might understand and relate to one another through their own experiences. This has resulted in theatre scholarship often failing to more readily provide ways of understanding autistic spectators when thinking about emotion within the theatre. As Milton proposes:

> 'empathy' so lauded in normative psychological models of human interaction refers to the ability a 'non-autism spectrum' (non-AS) individual has to assume understandings of the mental states

[29] Ibid.

> and motives of other people. When such 'empathy' is applied toward an 'autistic person', however, it is often wildly inaccurate in its measure[30]

Milton here criticises a neuronormative bias within psychological frameworks, where any neurodivergent form of empathy not aligning with or disrupting the logic of the applied psychological framework often being viewed as a form of cognitive deficiency. However, the frameworks used to reach such conclusions, the debate for instance over mentalising issues in autistic individuals, seem to suggest that attempts to form meanings by applying neurotypical frameworks onto autistic people that misrepresent autistic cognition. Instead, we should draw attention to the broad spectrum that autism exists upon, instead of operating on absolutes in regards to autistic neurology.

Understanding the range and scope of neurodivergent neurology is important in understanding the second in the triad of dominant theories within autism research, executive dysfunction, also referred to as frontal lobe syndrome. *The Encyclopaedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders* describes it as such by Nicole Rinehart, Peter Enticott, and John Bradshaw:

> Frontal lobe syndromes have in common abnormalities in structure and chemical balance in the frontal lobes, basal ganglia, and thalamus. Abnormalities in these structures and chemical imbalances are proposed to lead to deficiencies in the domains of cognition, emotions, and motor control. A mixture of these deficiencies can explain the symptomatology observed in classic frontal syndromes of childhood, for example, autism, Asperger's disorder (henceforth to be referred to as "autism spectrum disorder"), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and neurodegenerative frontal disorders, for example, Parkinson's and Huntington's disease.[31]

[30]Milton, pp.883-887.(p.883)
[31]' Nicole Rinehart, Peter Enticott and John Bradshaw, 'Frontal Lobe Syndrome', *Encyclopaedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, (Switzerland: Springer Cham, 2021) pp.2094-2099 (p.2094).

Frontal lobe syndrome theorises that chemical imbalances within the frontal lobes of the brain can cause disruption in the regulation of emotions, thoughts and actions, which can impact navigation of everyday life. Hyper fixation, daydreaming or spacing out, issues with organisational skills can all be considered as under the umbrella of executive dysfunctions. Because of the way the neurotypical world is structured and how neuronormative rhetoric frames autistic people, executive dysfunction can be at times debilitating experience as environments and situations are not made with autistic people in mind. In such cases, our 'dysfunction' is framed through a neuronormative lens of failing to adequately adapt to an environment or situation. This neuronormative bias is compounded by the fact that while many scholars might frame it as a neurological dysfunction, the exact causes of these moments of executive dysfunction are not fully understood neurologically, however Rinehart, Enticott, and Bradshaw write that:

> Although the precise cause of executive dysfunction in ASD is not known, researchers have used neuroimaging and electrophysiological techniques to demonstrate atypical activation across a range of frontostriatal cortical and subcortical structures.[32]

Despite the precise cause not being found between executive dysfunction and autism, Rinehart, Enticott, and Bradshaw write of the linkages between autism, genetics, and other neurodivergent cognitive states. They explain that:

> The common basis accounts for why there is high comorbidity within neurodevelopmental and neurodegenerative sub-groupings of frontal syndromes; for example, it is common for children with autism to also have clinical manifestations of ADHD. Such comorbidity may also point to common heritability factors across syndromes.[33]

Frontal lobe syndrome within autism then, could be as a result of other potential conditions that present themselves alongside autism. This means that ideas around frontal lobe syndrome are

[32] Ibid.,p.2095
[33] Ibid., p.2096.

somewhat fluid and vary from person to person based on their own specific needs and adjacent conditions they have in addition to being an autistic person. Ergo, care and support should be approached on a person-to-person basis, as frontal lobe syndrome manifests in different ways for different people, and it is important to understand that the ways in which it might impact that person can also vary. We also need to understand the ways in which expectations around neurodivergent people conforming to neuronormative rhetoric impacts autistic people. In understanding the broader ways we interact with the world and how we behave within a neuronormative western society, we can better understand the social factors at play as well as the neurological factors.

This feeds into the final part of the triad of theories for autism, weak central coherence. Francesca Happé explains that:

> The term "central coherence" refers to the "neurotypical" (NT, i.e., non-autistic) tendency to pull information together and process information in context, looking for the "big picture" and drawing out meaning, often at the expense of details. By contrast, "weak central coherence" refers to the tendency in ASD to attend to and remember details rather than global form or meaning[34]

Weak central coherence is interested in examining the differences in which neurotypical and autistic brains process information, and the divergence in perceived typical and atypical brains in regards to the cohesion of information. The term weak central coherence was originally coined by Uta Frith in her 1989 book *Autism: Explaining the Enigma,* where she writes that 'without this type of high-level cohesion, pieces of information would just remain pieces, be they small pieces or large pieces.'[35] But

[34] Francesca Happé, 'Weak Central Coherence' *Encyclopaedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, (Switzerland: Springer Cham, 2021) pp.5166-5168 (p.5166)
[35] Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) p.97

weak central coherence as a concept can be found as far back as Kanner's original reports, long before the conception of the theory by Frith had fully formed. Kanner writes that an:

> inability to experience wholes without full attention to the constituent parts[...] A situation, a performance, a sentence is not regarded as complete if it is not made up of exactly the same elements that were present at the time the child was first confronted with it. If the slightest ingredient is altered or removed, the total situation is no longer the same and therefore is not accepted as such[36]

Kanner here is relating some form of weak central coherence with a specific trait seen in many autistic people, an insistence on sameness, structure and routine. While this is indeed a common trait amongst autistic people, it is also important not to generalise, as autism exists upon a spectrum. However, this does provide a good example for the sorts of potential ways an autistic brain would function compared to a neurotypical brain. Personally, as an autistic person, if I saw a white shirt, I accept it as such. On the other hand , the moment said shirt has a stain or blemish on it, no matter how minor or small, I will be able to pinpoint it, and the shirt no longer is accepted as a shirt, but something gross disgusting and overwhelming that needs to be removed, because something alien has intruded upon what it should be, a shirt that should just be white. I am processing what is in front of me, even though it is clearly still a white shirt, I struggle to comprehend it as such because I am hyper fixating on the smallest of details.

Because of this difference in autistic brains and neurotypical brains, autistic brains being more detail orientated than a neurotypical brain, the term weak central coherence begins to be wrapped up in neuronormative rhetoric towards autism, by framing it as a deficit. I have never personally seen it as such, and the way my brain has processed information has helped me greatly many times. As such, weak central coherence is often reframed as detail focused processing, framing it not as a cognitive deficit but a different cognitive style. In framing it as a style rather than a deficit, these

[36] Kanner, p.246.

differences in cognition can be framed around the specific bias each separate cognitive style has. This means someone might learn another cognitive style, because their brain is biased in one aspect or another. Happé explains this very thing, proposing that:

> This bias can be overcome, just as NTs can overcome their preference for meaning to memorize "meaningless" information such as telephone numbers or bank codes. So, for example, people with ASC can read text for meaning, but unless asked to do so explicitly, their default approach may be to read a story as if it were just a list of words.[37]

1.4: Neurodiversity

This means that, autistic people can learn traits or characteristics their brains might not have due to a neurological bias. This is a practice that many autistic people do on a daily basis with the practice of masking, the act of trying to present and pass as neurotypical. In this way, many autistic people learn the ways a neurotypical brain operate as they attempt to hide their own neurodivergence. But seldom is this the case for neurotypicals, and as such these cognitive styles are vastly biased in regards to neurotypical and neuronormative approaches to cognitive function.

This belief in cognitive styles shapes the broad range of neurodivergent people that go about living their lives, resulting in the fundamental beliefs of the neurodiversity movement. The neurodiversity movement, which started in the 1990s, has come to become a powerful self-advocacy led movement championing for the rights of neurodivergent people. Steven K.Kapp writes that:

> The *neurodiversity movement* advocates for the rights of neurodivergent people, applying a framework or approach that values the full spectra of differences and rights such as autonomy and inclusion[38]

[37] Ibid.,p5167.
[38] Steven K. Kapp, 'Introduction', *Autistic Community and The Neurodiversity Movement; Stories from the Frontline*, Ed.Stephen K.Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp.1-19 (p.2).

The movement's approach to focusing on the neurological spectrum we all exist upon, places a sizable shift in the ways neurodivergence should be viewed, moving away from curative languages that frames autism as other. As Kapp continues:

> Autistic neurodiversity activists have defined critical autism studies not in terms of being critical of autism's existence (unlike many non-autistic thinkers outside the movement), but of the power dynamics that marginalize autistic scholars, pathologize autism, and overlook social factors that contribute to disability in autistic people.[39]

The field of autism research is in need of a rethinking of the ways they approach autistic scholarship when talking about autistic people, and how their own subjectivity either as an autistic or neurotypical person shapes and frames their perspectives. Our perspectives and voices should be heard within fields of research that we have first hand, lived experience of. As autistic people, we can provide a broader range of voices and perspectives that can shape a more diverse academic field. Self-advocacy and creating the spaces autistic people can come together in, and have their voices be heard, is an imperative part of this paradigm shift. As Kapp writes:

> The neurodiversity movement's approach holds autistic and neurodivergent people responsible not for the origin of our problems (social barriers exacerbating biological challenges), but for leading the effort to solve them[40]

We must seize the opportunity to make change and positive progressive reform that helps better the lives of autistic people and fight against neuronormative rhetoric that seeks to erase us. In making changes for the better for autistic people, we not only help in making our lives less about fitting into a neurotypical world, but rather, happy and comfortable to be who we are.

[39] Ibid.,p.9.
[40] Ibid.,p.9.

1.5: Gaps and Silences within Applied Theatre

This examination of the ways we must shift our thinking about autism research also extends towards applied theatre. John O'Toole asks if we are 'missing something vital by staying in our comfort zones'[41], asking for us to look at the 'gaps and silences'[42] in our work. Neuronormative biases exist within academic discourses more broadly, be it conscious or unconscious, and it is our responsibility to question whether we ourselves are staying within comfort zones or creating silence. Matt Omasta and Dani Snyder-Young wonder if O'Toole's remarks 'were a microcosm of broader trends in twenty-first century applied theatre/drama education research.'[43] Thomas Kuhn describes these trends as a:

> criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions. To a great extent these are the only problems that the community will admit[...]or encourage its members to undertake.[44]

Kuhn suggests a degree of research tunnel vision that might result in narrow avenues of academic inquiry. Omasta and Snyder-Young pose this question, asking 'whether our own field had adopted a research paradigm that allows us–or even encourages us–to neglect certain questions and approaches.' From an autistic's perspective, this is most certainly the case, as research is often done about us, but not with us. Our voices are used as data, but never used to let our work as scholars and artists breathe and flourish. As autistic scholars and artists, we have the opportunity to assist the field in breaking down such trends and fill in spaces in research where once there was only silence.

O'Toole believes this can be achieved to create effective policy change through '*Useful and usable* metrics about what is actually happening and not happening, and how people in large

[41]John O'Toole, 'A preflective keynote: IDIERI 2009', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol.15, Issue.2 (May,2010) pp.271-292 (p.287).
[42] Ibid., p.277.
[43] Matt Omasta and Dani Snyder-Young, 'Gaps, Silences and Comfort Zones: Dominant Paradigms in Educational Drama and Applied Theatre Discourse', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol.19, Issue,1 (February, 2014) pp.7-22 (p.8).
[44] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996) p.37.

numbers think and feel or don't think and feel'[45]. In this way, O'Toole believes qualitative approaches are of much more use when thinking about applied theatrical approaches. Data should not be used for the sake of data, but rather should be used in tandem with the voices of those they are representing to create a picture of the socio-political contexts of that group, and how to go about creating effective positive cultural and legislative change. Omasta and Snyder-Young write that:

> Collectively, we must practice a wide variety of research methodologies and report the results of our studies whether or not they align with our predetermined outcomes. We need to clearly distinguish between research for its own sake and research in service of advocacy.[46]

Omasta and Snyder-Young champion for the use of interdisciplinary research, and for academic disciplines to broaden beyond their own disciplines. Diverse academic methodologies create a more diverse body of academic work within the field. As they develop, 'Only by engaging in truly interdisciplinary, multilingual and honest research can we truly become advocates for our field.'[47] As an autistic person, it is important for me to take this approach to my research, situating my own identity and subjective experiences within the fields of disability studies and theatre and performance to paint a picture of UK arts access. To create effective policy changes, and to raise awareness on neuronormative biases within current structures for autistic people, it is important to take these understandings of autism and academic blind spots, and shape a theory and practice that can help theatregoers, scholars and artists.

1.6: Quirky Dramaturgy

As such, this thesis makes a two-pronged original contribution to knowledge in theatre and performance studies and disability studies by demonstrating how 'quirky dramaturgy' is a theory and

[45] O'Toole, pp.271-292 (p.286).
[46] Omasta and Snyder-Young, pp.7-22 (p.19).
[47] Ibid.

practice artists and scholars can use to think about the ways access can make unique theatrical experiences, and the ways it can be utilised alongside access policies to make more effective and holistic legislation for autistic people. With so many tensions within access policy for autistic people, access to theatres comes with a number of caveats that means not every autistic person has access to those experiences. Between the failure on the part of the institutions to both attempt effective and diverse access, programming, and employment opportunities, UK arts access policy becomes somewhat questionable as it seeks to create performative displays of accessibility that often fail in helping autistic people. Therefore, I propose the use of the term quirky to examine issues pertaining to neurodivergent identities and neurodivergent issues, to examine the state of arts access within the UK and to formulate a practice and theory that can be used by artists and scholars alike to create more inclusive work for autistic people. Quirkiness firstly draws attention to the atypicality of this way of experiencing theatre. This is outside of normative frameworks, it is 'quirky'. Donald W. Bruckner, writing on quirky desire, defines it as follows: 'A quirky desire is one that is difficult to understand, or appears downright inscrutable, extremely strange, unusual or maximally idiosyncratic.'[48] Bruckner situates the quirky as outside the sphere of normality. The quirky is positioned here as something of a language that is hard to understand if someone operates under a more typical cognitive framework, because the reasoning for quirky actions might be seen to be difficult to rationalise. We might therefore consider it similar to two different language speakers, not understanding the tongue the other is speaking. We might say tensions over access for autistic people is a translation issue, with neurotypical people not understanding the language they are translating. I make a case for quirky dramaturgy as a theory and practice which creates accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. The performances I will analyse in the following chapters will show the range and breadth of work that is using a quirky

[48] Donald W. Bruckner, 'Quirky Desires and Well-Being', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy,* Vol.10, Issue.2 (June,2016) pp.1-35 (p.2).

dramaturgical practice which can promote a more healthy and holistic approach to arts access. Likewise, in regards to arts access, the following chapters will draw attention to the work of artists, activists and scholars who seek to advocate for create lasting policy reform. The following chapters will highlight that quirkiness can be seen as relational to theatre access and fundamental to how we go about understanding its mechanics. This will be done by examining the relationship of quirkiness, structure and form and how it suits the needs of the individual. Doing so involves investigating the ways in which quirkiness and cognition are in dialogue with the structure of the performance, and how we can apply this idea of the quirky to a dramaturgical practice, using autistic or atypical perceptions of the world to shape dramaturgical form, making accessible performances and opportunities for autistic people. Dramaturgy, as Katalin Trencsényi explains;

> is the action through which meaning is created by the recognition and arrangement of patterns. This act of composition or construction in the theatre today is understood in the context of the performance as a dynamic and durational whole.[49]

In taking the idea of the quirky and applying it to a dramaturgical methodology, we can begin to construct and rearrange the performance event to be both accessible and reflective of the lived experiences of autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy provides a theory and practice for performance making that is not only reflective of those whose cognition is deemed neuro-atypical but also creates performances during which autistic people can feel free to express and be themselves without judgement. The thesis elaborates quirky dramaturgy as a theory and practice of creating accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs.

Quirky dramaturgy has three defining features, relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness. Relaxedness relates to the ways in which an autistic person can be made to feel safe and

[49] Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in The Making: A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015) p. xxi.

comfortable, and the access and support that can be provided to them. Flexibility focuses on the ways in which the structure of a performance can be made fluid to be responsive to what an autistic person might want or need. Finally, neuroqueerness is a feature that disrupts neuronormative rhetoric, instead giving agency to autistic people. Throughout the following chapters of this thesis, I will present the various forms and manifestations of quirky dramaturgy by focusing on its application in the determining contexts of space, audience, performer and community, and how this theatrical framework can impact UK arts access. Quirky dramaturgy is a theory and practice that seeks to work with access policies, artists, audiences, and theatres to create inclusive performance events. Quirky dramaturgical practices create access not just through physical alterations to a space or production, but through the promise of safety to express one's self within that space as well. Quirky dramaturgy must understand its audience. In particular it must understand their interlinking atypicality within neuronormative models of thinking about cognition. Resultantly, quirky performances are elastic, fluid sites, meaning that quirky dramaturgy can alter and adapt to numerous other forms of arts access while not itself being defined as such. Quirky dramaturgies are designed to cater to and help their intended autistic audiences experience performance that has been made with them in mind. As such the logics might seem strange, unfamiliar or unknowable to a neurotypical spectator who is acclimatised to a very specific and different type of theatregoing framework. But just because quirky dramaturgy might seem atypical, that does not mean these fluid spaces are without reason or purpose. Quirky dramaturgical theories and practices do not disrupt a theatrical logic for the sake of being quirky, but rather emphasise a change in the ways in which people might experience theatre, and how an autistic person will access it. Speaking in relation to common and quirky desires, Bruckner emphasises this point. Bruckner proposes that:

> we do not usually challenge the common desires of others because we can easily supply a desirability characterisation or it just does not occur to us to request one because we can easily supply a desirability characterisation or it just does not occur to us to request one because we ourselves share the desires[…]But just as common desires are shown to be welfare-relevant when

the agent can offer appropriate reason for the desire, so too can a quirky desire be shown to be relevant.[50]

What Bruckner lays out is a bias in the ways in which common and quirky desires are read. For Bruckner the quirky can likewise be shown to be useful if one can provide reason for the quirkiness. This line of analysis is somewhat problematic if we assume an autistic person must give an explanation every time they do something deemed atypical, but indeed it is true that this sort of dialogue can be an interesting way of highlighting the biases of many against quirkiness and its social relevancy beyond being seen as an aesthetic or behaviour centred around atypicality for the sake of atypicality. And by extension this emphasises the issues in approaching the way us autistic theatregoers might act within a space as "autism as a result of autism". Such approaches are reductive and detract from the wonderfully unique outlooks and ways of experiencing the world that we have. These fluid performance experiences situate a new spectator paradigm within the theatre space that emphasises how important atypical aesthetics can be to autistic arts access.

I will ask three research questions which are pertinent to the subject of this thesis. This will be achieved through showcasing the practice of quirky dramaturgy, which shall be informed through the use of performance analysis, arts access policy analysis, UK Disability legislation and the analysis of neuroscientific research into autism. The first research question I will ask is; How does quirky dramaturgy create distinct theatrical experiences for autistic people that improves upon current autism friendly performances?; I will pursue this question by presenting the current state of access throughout the chapters of this thesis, from the current state of UK relaxed performances, theatre etiquette and autistic audiences, autistic arts employment, I will show the ways in which a quirky dramaturgical framework helps in creating accessible and distinct theatrical experiences. These experiences, such as relaxed performances or participation-based works of theatre like those of Oily Cart, focus on framing the performance event around autistic perceptions of the world, and creating

[50] Bruckner, pp.1-35, (p.9).

spaces that encourage and celebrate autistic behaviour that is demonised in a more traditional theatrical setting.

This leads into the second research question of this thesis; how does quirky dramaturgy promote self-advocacy and policy reform within the UK for autistic people? The analysis of arts access policy and disability legislation within the UK, such as the '*State of Theatre Access'* reports and Arts Council England's 'Making a Shift' report will provide qualitative data through which to critically engage with contemporary UK arts access. Through the use of quirky dramaturgical theories and practices, I will show the ways in which reform can be created by placing the autistic individual at the centre of the dramaturgical process and giving them agency in the ways they wish access to be provided. This process of looking for reform through dramaturgical practices underscores the third and final research question that this thesis will answer: Does current UK arts access policy do enough to help support autistic people? A pertinent question, which as the following chapters will show, UK arts access at present fails to go far enough in providing wide reaching support for autistic people, with institutions instead focusing on performative and tokenistic outreach strategies. The chapters of this thesis are divided into four distinct categories, each aiming at analysing a specific aspect of performance and how quirky dramaturgical practices adapt these aspects of performance to be reflective of autistic people's perceptions of the world. These aspects are space, audience, performer and community. All four are interwoven into the fabric of each other and speak to the physical and metaphysical aspects of the performance event. Space is important for understanding the rights to access buildings and other physical sites one might wish to visit. Space is in this case imperative for understanding the theatre building itself, the front of house, the auditorium, even bathrooms. Therefore, space will relate to the ways in which quirky dramaturgy impact the theatre space itself, both in regards to the auditorium and the theatre building, and in regards to rethinking how we navigate or frame space during a performance event for autistic people in such a way that it does not feel like another uncomfortable navigation of the neurotypical world. This feeds into the importance of audiences within the practices of quirky dramaturgy. How audiences behave within

theatre spaces is also an important part of the performance event and provides potential access barriers for autistic people. Policing of behaviour within theatre spaces and hostility towards how an audience member might behave contrary to expectations can make theatregoing at times a stressful or humiliating experience. Quirky dramaturgy rethinks more traditional audience behavioural frameworks, and looks instead at trying to have audiences directly engage with the performance. As a result, I will use the analysis of audiences in quirky dramaturgy to highlight the ways contemporary UK theatre etiquette and the culture it promotes creates access issues for autistic people, and how we might go about rethinking this problematic dynamic. From here artists are important for examining the other side of the dynamic of audience and performer. It is also imperative to focus on the ways in which the artists themselves use quirky dramaturgy to make known their own autistic subjectivity. The artist is an imperative part of quirky dramaturgy, for without them, no performance event could exist for potential audiences to see. The relationship between the artist and quirky dramaturgy also raises the issue of access and support for autistic theatre makers into question, and how the quirky can be used to examine a more holistic and elastic approach for artists. From here, the examination of artists will highlight the issues of employment within the arts and the importance of the visibility of the autistic artist when so often their presence within mainstream theatrical productions is erased. And finally, communities will look at the ways quirky dramaturgy can bring autistic people together, being a catalyst for new relationships to be formed and for the performance event to be a way for people to begin to be vocal self-advocates. Community is an important part of quirky dramaturgical practice as performance events are structured and framed around autistic people. Community is about how space, audience and artists come together to create experiences that foster community and togetherness, with people finding comradery and safety with fellow autistics without fear.

1.7: Chapter Overview

The following chapters will be a showcase of quirky dramaturgy and how its features function through the realms of space, audience, performer and communities. Chapter 2 examines theatre spaces in relation to quirky dramaturgy and relaxed performance. Within the sphere of space, relaxedness ensures how comfortable a space is for an autistic person. Alongside this, flexibility within spaces operates through the range of other pieces of assistance that can help them navigate a space (for instance ear defenders, chill out zones, social stories), while neuroqueerness intervenes in the neuronormative logics of a space, making it reflective of autistic experiences and the autistic mind. By engaging with the features of quirky dramaturgy through space, the core aim of this chapter is to question and interrogate whether relaxed performance policy in the UK is effective at providing access to theatre spaces for autistic audiences. This will be done by applying a performance analysis to two specific relaxed performances, the late 2018/early 2019 production of *Philip Pullman's Grimm Tales* at The Unicorn Theatre, and the 2019 production of *All in a Row* at The Southwark Playhouse. These two specific case studies have been chosen as both provide an effective showcase of the current state of UK relaxed performance and how policy shapes these theatre spaces. The Unicorn Theatre is one of the progenitors of UK relaxed performance and one of the UK's leading children's theatres. As relaxed performance currently is a form of access that exists primarily within children's theatre, The Unicorn provides a case study that can shine a light on both relaxed performances within children's theatre and the forms of access The Unicorn provides with its historical linkages to relaxed performance. The Southwark Playhouse's relaxed performance of *All in a Row* is infamous for both the grotesque puppet used as a stand-in for an autistic child and ableist content within the play itself. Beyond this the relaxed performance had minimal access that was ineffective, making the relaxed performance of this production a fruitful case study to examine the issues relaxed performance within the UK currently has. To create an effective critical framework to explore these research questions through these case studies, I will be using performance scholar Ben-Fletcher-Watson and artist and disability activist Jess Thom as core parts of the critical theory of

the chapter, analysing both the policy making strategies of relaxed performance and their critical implications within the aesthetic of the quirky. I will also draw from '*The State of Theatre*' reports of 2017 and 2019 to provide further statistical data to breakdown the access offered by UK theatres to autistic audiences.

Chapter 3 shifts focus from looking at how spaces might accommodate autistic audiences, to examining how quirky dramaturgy impacts autistic theatregoers. The features of quirky dramaturgy explored within this chapter will show that audiences are restricted in access to performances, not just because of physical and technical restraints a space might pose, but also due to UK theatre etiquette culture and the people within those spaces. I will show the ways participatory performance elements within quirky dramaturgy help allow autistic people to express their autistic traits safely and with confidence. This shall be achieved by examining how quirky dramaturgy enables audience behaviours that subverts neuronormative expectations of theatre etiquette. Within the sphere of audiences, relaxedness ensures autistic theatregoers will not have behaviour policed. Flexibility operates in space through participatory and immersive experiences that give autistic people the freedom to choose how they engage with the performance, while neuroqueerness allows for autistic behaviour that neuronormative frameworks deem disruptive. My performance analysis of *Sometimes I Leave* by Vijay Patel at The Ovalhouse in 2019 and *All Wrapped Up* by Oily Cart at Stratford Circus in 2020 will be used to show this audience dynamic in practice. Both performances explore the relationship between audience participation and autism, for Patel through audiences actively participating in the fiction of the performance and being asked to question him on his experiences as an autistic person, and for Oily Cart through the use of allowing autistic children to play within the world of the performance. I will show how the cognitive framework of the neuroqueer within both these performances can be used as a quirky audience practice that rejects normative ideas of behaviour, selfhood and appropriateness. Melanie Yergeau in their book *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, provides an important critical framework through which I will present the ways in which quirky dramaturgy frames

audiences. As such, this will emphasise that the participatory focus of quirky dramaturgy encourages and celebrates autistic sensory and cognitive characteristics as opposed to othering them. Outside of the neuroqueer, Caroline Heim is important due to her analysis and historicising of audience behaviour and etiquette. Through critiquing and examining the theory of mind frameworks that plague how autistic cognition is read and understood, I shall show how both Patel and Oily Cart are examples of quirky dramaturgical practices that place focus on autistic experiences.

Chapter 4 builds upon the ways in which quirky dramaturgical frameworks promotes distinct experiences for autistic theatregoers, by now shifting to examining the role of the artist in the development of those performance experiences previously discussed within Chapters 2 and 3. I will underscore the ways in which quirky dramaturgical practices speak to wider employment issues within the arts sector for autistic people, how autistic performance makers create access for themselves through their work, and how this feeds back into autistic audience agency. This will be achieved through an analysis of how quirky dramaturgy impacts autistic arts practices, and how its features create [dis]comfort (made to make autistic people comfortable, make neurotypicals uncomfortable). Within the sphere of performers, relaxedness ensures support for autistic artists when making work or looking for work, while flexibility means the artist has creative freedom to express themselves. Alongside this, neuroqueerness means artists makes performances that manifests their lived experiences as an autistic person and their relationship with the neurotypical world, often through some form of persona or alternative universe that the performance exists within. As a result, autistic artists within their arts practices critique arts employment opportunities for autistic and disabled people within the UK through a combination of these quirky dramaturgical features. This chapter is a natural progression from the discussions on audiences and participatory performances from Chapter 3, and now focuses more readily on the impact quirky dramaturgy has on an artist's practice, and how policy is currently formed in the UK in regards to disabled employment legislation. This practice analysis will be framed through the work of autistic performance makers Cian Binchy and Xandri Selwyn, and how their performance practices use

[dis]comfort to critique. Binchy's 2018 performance in *MADHOUSE: Re Exit* at Shoreditch Town Hall and Selwyn's 2019 performance of *#Binariesbegone* at The Autism Arts Festival will both be used as examples of the [dis]comforting effects their performance making has on theatregoers. *MADHOUSE is* a show about autistic cognition and breaking down disability stereotypes, with Binchy performing in his persona of the human baby. While *#Binariesbegone* is a satirical dystopian examination of a world where identity has been eradicated and homogenised, and asks us to think of the socio-political conditions within contemporary Britain that seeks to push towards such a future. This chapter will show how effective quirky dramaturgical uses of [dis]comfort by Binchy and Selwyn not only critiques current employment legislation and framework for autistic people, but points towards effective policy change. In looking into the relationship of autism and practice, I will frame the kinaesthetic and cognitive relationship between artist and practice, and using writings of comedy scholar Andrew Stott as a framework through which to imagine the impacts of those performance frameworks under quirky logics. I will develop upon the idea of the neuroqueer from Chapter 3, and how Binchy and Selwyn frame their performances around challenging neuronormative rhetoric, and how this impacts visibility for autistic artists. This critical analysis comes once more from Yergeau, but also Kathryn Bond-Stockton's *The Queer Child*, as I showcase how alternative and divergent paths of growing up impacts autistic lives and perceptions of autism, specifically in relation to infantilising autistic people and their rights to work. I will show through [dis]comfort the ways arts practice might inform policy change and reform, examining the current disabled employment landscape under successive Conservative governments and its impact on disabled employability within the arts sector. This will be used in conjunction with reports such as Arts Council England's '*Making a Shift'* report, highlighting policy reform that needs to occur within the arts sector for more inclusive workforces within the arts sector, which in conjunction with Conservative government policy strategies towards disabled people, emphasises how important the role of the autistic artist is in putting pressure on institutions and organisations for holistic and elastic reform. The quirky dramaturgical approaches of Binchy and Selwyn and the [dis]comfort at the root of their

performances are fundamental to my exploration of policy reform, which will be critically framed through the work of Janine Booth in her book *Autism Equality in the Workplace*. These arts employment reforms will underscore that the arts sector, often priding itself on inclusive values and diversity, should be held to a higher standard when they fundamentally fail in the carrying out of the tenents they claim to abide by. Quirky dramaturgy, as I will show, highlights this paradox within the arts sector through engaging with the ways that the autistic artist is treated and viewed and then manifesting constructions of that image to parody. Resultantly, the features of quirky dramaturgy create [dis]comfort and raise issues of arts employment access for autistic people, and how we can best make positive change and reform.

Chapter 5 brings together elements of space, audience and performer practice to examine the role quirky dramaturgy has in engaging with and mobilising autistic communities, to illustrate the ways quirky dramaturgies are rooted in community engagement with autistic people. Within the sphere of community, relaxedness ensures autistic people interact within a community setting in ways that make them comfortable. (e.g social traffic lights, talking digitally in online spaces). As well as this, flexibility means communities should give feedback to ensure access can be reformed and be fluid, allowing for communication and reform in the ways in which care and support can be given to autistic people, meaning they can choose how they wish to interact and engage with access that is provided to them. Finally, neuroqueerness turns the performance event into a hub for people to gather, socialise and self-advocate, creating events at which autistic people can come together and interact as autistic people, free of neuronormative rhetoric. The function of the features of quirky dramaturgy in relation to community will result in analysing how important the use of performance festivals and curated artistic online spaces are in the creation of autistic communities, and whether this approach can be shifted beyond the site of the festival and into a larger rights-based self-advocacy movement. To do so I will examine the performance of autistic artist Annette Foster's *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang*, a participatory performance making heard the lived experiences of female, transgender and non-binary autistic people, during the 2019 Autism Arts Festival. The

Autism Arts Festival was a relaxed performance festival that took place at The University of Kent that brought autistic artists across the UK together to present work in their respective artistic mediums. This chapter will employ a performance analysis of Foster and the Autism Arts Festival to explore the ways in which the intersectional approaches of queerness and autism within Foster's performance are situated within the context of the inclusive relaxed setting of the Autism Arts Festival. I will compare Foster's work with Flute Theatre's 2020 online production of *Pericles Online*, a participation based digital performance made with young autistic people and their families in mind. The performance was created, devised and adapted from a live production by Flute Theatre as a response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the lockdown restrictions that were implemented across the UK. Through doing this, this chapter will underscore the importance of communication and reaching out to create networks of support, examining the social and communal aspects present in festival settings and online during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Neal Carnes writing on community lays out a foundation through which to critically examine the function of communities within a quirky context, alongside the writings of many autistic community leaders who have been compiled by Steven K. Kapp within the book *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline*. Engaging with the writings of activists and writers who are prominent autistic community leaders and the work that they do helps further flesh out this idea of community and communication within quirky dramaturgies as I argue for the ways in which the Autism Arts Festival and Flute Theatre achieve these community focused goals. I will examine the social aspects of both festivals and digital spaces, looking at the work of Jen Harvie to examine the political potentiality and radicalism possible in festival settings. This, in conjunction with the examination of studies looking at COVID-19 and isolation during lockdowns, will formulate the importance of the social experience and need to communicate and connect as autistic people.

1.8: Relaxedness

Beyond the overview of the chapters within the thesis and the shape this project will take, it is also imperative to have an understanding of the functionality of the three defining features of quirky dramaturgy, how they function, and how they will be used throughout the course of the upcoming chapters. Relaxedness is a feature of quirky dramaturgy that focuses upon the comfort and safety that the theory and practice of quirky dramaturgy affords to autistic people. The aim in this regard is to remove access barriers and ensure an autistic person can engage with theatre and performance without potential triggers that could cause emotional distress or physical harm. Relaxedness is a feature that aims to deconstruct and remove barriers from environments while also providing safety and security for autistics. The features of relaxedness and the way it can assist autistic audiences currently exists in UK theatre through relaxed performances, which will be delved into within Chapter 2. Within Chapter 2 I shall examine current relaxed theatre practices and compare them to the ways in which a quirky dramaturgical approach to spatial access might deal with the same circumstances. Relaxed performances seek to break down the normal aesthetic and behavioural conventions within theatre in favour of a framework that is concerned first and foremost with making autistic audiences feel comfortable and safe. In Chapter 3 I will use relaxedness to show how participatory and immersive theatrical experiences help autistic audiences feel comfortable within a performance space, and how it allows for them to freely express themselves free of policing of behaviour. The way in which relaxed and neuronormative features engage with autistic audiences is the difference between feeling safe and always feeling as if you do not belong. Therefore, in providing access that makes autistic audiences feel more engaged and comfortable within a space via relaxed performances, the practice of quirky dramaturgy is shown to be focused on the inverting of neuronormative frameworks and structures, making sure that autistic people have a sanctuary, somewhere that can provide enjoyment and happiness. I have navigated the neurotypical world as an autistic my whole life, dealing with severe depression and at time suicidal thoughts. Theatre and performance were a sanctuary for me, they helped relax me and put me at ease. Chapter 5 will

emphasise this aspect of relaxedness, and the importance of communities and support networks for autistic people, more so during and after national lockdowns within the UK as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having the understanding that others understand your experiences and perceptions of the world, and do not judge you for it, highlights why relaxedness is so important to a quirky dramaturgical practice, because it aims to provide an escape, a way to decompress, and most importantly, a place an autistic person might go to be treated with respect and care. This approach also emphasises that it is not simply enough to define a quirky dramaturgy because it has undergone perceived aesthetic access changes, something Chapter 2 emphasises with lacklustre and tokenistic approaches to access by theatre institutions, but highlights that understanding social access is also important to relaxedness in quirky dramaturgy.

Relaxedness as a feature of quirky dramaturgy seeks to reposition the social logics of theatre to better accommodate autistic people, making perceived atypical behaviours or aesthetics into familiar, safe and accessible environments that are understandable for autistic audiences. This means not only the spatial and behavioural aspects that relaxedness addresses in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, but also, as I will show in Chapter 5, the support and care autistic people working within the arts sector receive, and how quirky dramaturgy can use relaxedness to support autistic artists. Quirky dramaturgy uses relaxedness to create environments for autistic audiences to engage with theatre in ways that do not provide sensory or social stress, instead creating performance experiences that are situated as atypical. Each chapter of this thesis articulates the core principle of relaxedness, that through creating and imagining these different ways of experiencing theatre outside of mainstream performances that prove inaccessible to the needs of autistic spectators, such sites can be viewed as environments where autistic audiences can freely experience theatre in a way that makes sense for them. In Chapter 2, this is through spatial access and support, in Chapter 3 this is through challenging UK theatre etiquette culture that has created access issues, in Chapter 4 this is through support for autistic artists, and in Chapter 5 this is through the bringing together of communities to support one another. In encouraging arts access and engagement for autistic

people, we also see the ways in which relaxedness operates with the aim of providing the environments wherein autistic audiences can freely express themselves, and that quirky dramaturgy becomes a means of promoting autistic self-advocacy.

Taking this underlying understanding of relaxedness as a feature of quirky dramaturgy and how it operates, it is important to examine the historical and ideological underpinnings of relaxedness. Relaxed performances are a relatively new mode of framing the performance event for autistic or intellectually disabled individuals, that is the current form of autistic arts access throughout the UK. Ben Fletcher-Watson contextualises the history and genesis of the relaxed performances as becoming:

> a part of inclusive theatre practice in 2009, with the first autism friendly performances taking place at Polka Theatre in London. Other pioneers included West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, as well as London's Little Angel Theatre and Unicorn Theatre.[51]

Fletcher-Watson develops the idea that relaxed performances are rooted twofold in the want 'to encourage attendance at mainstream productions by audiences disadvantaged by various factors'[52] and the issues around neurodivergent spectators potentially being cut off from mainstream theatre access 'due to concerns about potential disruption for other theatre goers.'[53] Fletcher-Watson expands upon this point. He argues that:

> Some, but not all people with also have an intellectual disability (ID). For autistic audience members with or without ID, crowds of people, loud noises, unfamiliar spaces and dimmed lighting can conspire to produce a profoundly unsettling atmosphere. [54]

[51] Ben Fletcher Watson, 'Relaxed Performance: audiences with autism in mainstream theatre', *The Scottish Journal of Performance*, Vol.2 (June,2015) pp.61-89, (p.63).
[52] Ibid., pp.62-63.
[53] Ibid., p.63.
[54] Ibid, pp.62-63.

Relaxed performance has led to a surge of autistic and intellectually disabled performance makers and organisations, such as the rapid growth and development of performance company *Access All Areas* under artistic director Nick Llewellyn from 2009 onwards, autism conferences in the UK such as Autscape and Autrea*t* and the Autism Arts Festival in Canterbury, the latter of which being a focal point of Chapter 5, as the Autism Arts Festival gave a platform for autistic artists, and was designed to be as friendly and inclusive for autistic spectators and performers as possible.

Hannah Simpson believes in a relaxedness that discards generalised behavioural expectations for a space that can open diverse communal engagements between autistic and neurotypical audiences. Simpson sees that 'the neurodivergent spectator's presence in the auditorium offers a new perspective on theatre's value as an embodied communal event'.[55] She develops the idea that:

> Rethinking quiet-audience etiquette not only benefits the neurodivergent spectator who might otherwise struggle to access the mainstream theatre auditorium, but it also places a renewed emphasis on the theatre's fundamental construction as a live, embodied encounter with other individuals.[56]

Simpson proposes that relaxed spaces are a means of communal gathering for a neurologically diverse number of people, divergent or typical, that at its core helps autistic spectators better understand and navigate a range of social contexts, but also allows for typical spectators to more readily engage and understand neurodivergent individuals. In fact, Simpson believes relaxed performance to be a response to implicit behavioural conventions of silence within mainstream theatre and its aggressive policing of said social conventions. Simpson's work is linked to the fundamental aspect of quirky dramaturgy that I discuss in Chapter 3: that relaxedness and safety stems from the safety an autistic theatregoer receives from freely being allowed to express

[55] Hannah Simpson, 'Tics in The Theatre: The Quiet Audience, The Relaxed Performance, and The Neurodivergent Spectator', *Theatre Topics*, Vol.28, (November, 2018) pp.227-238, (p.227).
[56] Ibid, p.229.

themselves. The work of Vijay Patel and Oily Cart both showcase this important fact through the ways they engage with their audiences directly and through exploration of the performance world. Simpson goes on to argue that:

> The relaxed performance acknowledges that a mobile or vocal spectator can still be a focused spectator. For many individuals—including those with no diagnosed impairment, only simply noisier or more kinetic attentional behaviour—the nonconformance to quiet-audience etiquette in fact often indicates a more intense and genuine attention to the performance at hand.[57]

Relaxed performance for Simpson is not just for neurodivergent spectators, although its own philosophy of spectatorship and the performance event readily cater to said groups. Rather, relaxedness within quirky dramaturgy is an open, inclusive means of ensuring that spectators do not feel judged for not embodying an institution's implicit behavioural conventions. This is important for autistic spectators, who often struggle to understand implicit social conventions, instead responding better to explicit rules or instructions.

Aoife Monks argues that 'The quirky is at once a means to knowledge and a mechanism that sets in motion the rapturous fantasy of the unknowable.'[58] Monks argues towards the quirky as a form of estrangement, an aesthetic that through its atypicality both generates new modes of engaging while operating outside of perceived aesthetic logics. And for Monks, these aesthetic logics are historical. She argues, that 'in scholarly terms, it's the past where the quirky belongs.'[59] When thinking historically about the relationship between quirky dramaturgy within the theatre, and the access and experience changes relaxedness might bring about, quirky dramaturgy seems to be defined by its resistance and atypicality to the historical and social contexts of the theatre space. Instead, quirky dramaturgy places itself as a way to open access through disrupting the historical, cultural and social logics of a space, using relaxedness as a medium to turn hostile environments into

[57] Ibid.
[58] Aoife Monks, 'Bad Art, Quirky Modernism', *Representations,* Vol.132, (Fall, 2015) pp.104-111 (p.105).
[59] Ibid., p.106.

places of safety. A distinct and simple example of this sort of relaxed alteration would be the use of lighting in the theatre. Having house lights on during a performance in a traditional theatre auditorium provides a means of intervening into the ways theatre lighting has affected audience behaviour within a space. The access change is atypical within contemporary theatre practices outside of a quirky setting, and creates a space that emphasises spectator expressiveness and ensures a much less stressful space for sensory triggers.

1.9: Flexibility

Just as imperative to quirky dramaturgy as relaxedness, flexibility is a feature that aims to ensure elasticity in the ways in which performance engages with autistic theatregoers. Flexibility emphasises that access issues are not just a result of autistic traits, but also are due to the inability of theatres to act. This is particularly noticeable in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 where I articulate this point by critiquing respectively the inability on the part of institutions and policy makers to act to ensure flexible care and support for autistic people. In Chapter 2, current approaches to relaxed performances and relaxed spaces are shown to be tokenistic and not wide reaching enough, while in Chapter 4 I argue employment opportunities for autistic people do not effectively provide the necessary support and resources. Fletcher-Watson writes that 'some theatres still do not actively welcome patrons who require accommodations to enjoy a performance, seeing them perhaps as outside their desired audience, or part of outreach activity rather than customers.'[60] Flexibility for quirky dramaturgy provides elasticity in how autistics wish to engage with the performance event. This means a fluid structure that does not try to be restrictive in autistic self-expression, but instead creates freedom for exploration in regards to both the forms of access and the ways in which they wish to engage with the performance. This is particularly important within Chapter 3, where I discuss performance events that create participatory and immersive experiences that cater to the cognitive and kinaesthetic qualities of autistic people and how they wish to engage with the performance.

[60] Fletcher-Watson, pp.61-89, (p.65).

By framing the theory and practice of quirky dramaturgy through this lens, flexibility ensures that the performance event is shaped around the autistic theatregoer, that their needs are met and that their presence is felt. Throughout Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, this presence of the autistic theatregoer and artist is made central, with the performance events under discussion shaped around them and their lived experiences of being autistic. Flexibility's role within quirky dramaturgy highlights the very elasticity of the term dramaturgy, using this as a conduit through which to create access and policy reform, as displayed by the theatre access reform discussed in Chapter 2, the employment reform discussed in Chapter 4, and the use of communities to create feedback on access practices and policies discussed in Chapter 5. Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner write about the flexibility of the term dramaturgy. They argue that:

> Although dictionaries and encyclopaedias offer apparent clear explanations, these are insufficient to address the multiple and complex uses of the word, which has, in contemporary theory and practice, become an altogether flexible, fluid, encompassing and expanded term.[61]

Behrndt and Turner argue that dramaturgy as a practice and means of examining dramatic form and structure is fluid. The fluidity and potentials that dramaturgy brings to the ways in which we see access as an artistic and creative aspect of theatre is imperative to the ways in which a quirky dramaturgy functions and is reflective of the diverse range of neurological outlooks. Dramaturgy can offer us the chance as performance makers and scholars to think about the ways in which us autistic people see and experience theatre, and imagine the ways in which our minds can become the foundation for thinking about form and structure in a distinctly autistic way. Behrndt and Turner summarise this sentiment perfectly, writing that 'the practice of dramaturgy, in the sense of analytical process, offers an ongoing, implicit exploration of what a 'work' can be.'[62] This means that by having a theory and practice like quirky dramaturgy that is always responding and changing with

[61] Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Revised Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p.21.
[62] Ibid., p.23.

the needs of its autistic audiences, more impactful pieces of legislation from lawmakers can be created to best support autistic people.

Brecht's conception of production dramaturgy emphasises quirky dramaturgy's intersection between fluidity and the political, as he imagines the role of the dramaturg not just as a theatrical architect, structuring and forming the shape and body of a live performance, but also an active critical and political role, seeking to curate the ideological underpinnings of a performance and how to best communicate them towards audiences. Joel Schechter says that 'The dramaturg became the director's most important theoretical collaborator. Dramaturgy in Brecht's sense comprises the entire conceptual preparation from its inception to its realisation'[63] The dramaturg under the logics of Brechtian production dramaturgy is not only responsible for the dramatic structuring and framing of the performance, but the critical theory that informs the work of the performance. This is seen in Chapter 4, with Binchy and Selwyn's practices as artists being used to articulate their lived experiences, expressing issues of autism, gender and sexuality to speak on issues of representation and the importance of autistic voices. The dramaturg is therefore responsible for the devising and communication of critical theory in collaboration with the director and ensuring the clarity of articulation of the metaphysical as well as the physical elements of a production for the theatregoing public. Magda Romanska writes that:

> The dramaturg was to participate in rehearsals and to convey his research and knowledge to other members of the production team, particularly the director, before and during the production process. He was also to function as a liaison between the team and the audience, writing program notes and theoretical articles on the production.[64]

Brechtian production dramaturgy makes the role of the dramaturg not just an artistic endeavour, but an academic and scholarly endeavour also. The dramaturg, for Brecht, approaches

[63] Joel Schechter, Quoted in, Magda Romanska, 'Introduction', *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2016) pp.1-15 (p.2).
[64] Romanska, pp.1-15 (pp.2-3).

dramaturgical practice as more than a theatrical practitioner, but also a scholar who disseminates their knowledge and expertise to others within the production team. Rehearsals become more than the physical blocking and staging of the performance, but also workshopping of critical ideas, leading to debate and discussion as to how to best frame and articulate these ideological underpinnings.

This framing of the dramaturg as a scholar is developed further by Erving Goffman, who provides a marrying of dramaturgical thinking with sociology in his 1956 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Romanska writes that 'Goffman's dramaturgical theory of human behaviour viewed everyday as a series of theatrical events, performed along the lines of pre-established social scripts.'[65] Rather than the political radicalism afforded by Brechtian production dramaturgy, Goffman argued that humans behave and curate a set of social scripts throughout their everyday lives which they use in their presentation of self and engagement with one another. Goffman gives an example of this social scripting and through the behaviour of a grocer. Goffman writes that 'A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer'.[66] Romanska goes on to contend that 'Goffman argued, human identity is not stable, but constantly reframed by the dramaturgy of one's role performed in response to external interactions.'[67] This social dramaturgy is also relevant to the social masking autistic people do in order to mask or blend into neurotypical society. Autistic people therefore already have an innate unconscious dramaturgical ability under the paradigms of social dramaturgy, making it a fertile means of creating dramaturgical frameworks for theatre and performance. It is for this reason flexibility is imperative to quirky dramaturgy, as having a theory and practice that is shaped by the experiences and lived embodied practices of autism, means a theory and practice that is best suited to work that puts to the forefront autistic theatregoers.

[65] Ibid., p.4.
[66] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1969) p.82.
[67] Romanska, pp.1-15 (p.4.)

1.10 Neuroqueer

Quirky dramaturgy's focus on autistic subjectivity and more atypical forms of theatre means a direct opposition to neuronormative perceptions of autism and the policies that are informed by such perceptions. This means that when something within a quirky dramatical framework is inversing, parodying or making a direct counter to neuronormative rhetoric, it is neuroqueering. The term neuroqueer originates on online neurodivergent blog spaces such as that of academic and activist Nick Walker, where she lays out the foundations of the term 'as the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously'[68] They add that:

> A neuroqueer individual is any individual whose identity, selfhood, gender performance, and/or neurocognitive style have in some way been shaped by their engagement in practices of neuroqueering, regardless of what gender, sexual orientation, or style of neurocognitive functioning they may have been born with.[69]

Therefore, to neuroqueer is to do something informed by your experiences existing within a neuronormative society. The aim is to challenge and remove oneself from the hierarchies that seek to make people conform to a normative framework. The feeling of being free from the pressure to conform to a neuronormative or heteronormative way of being is paramount to the growth and development of all autistic people in making sense of themselves and the world around them. Quirky dramaturgy through the performances it creates, encourages and celebrates being autistic and welcomes behaviour and practices that might be deemed atypical or disruptive from a neuronormative rhetorical perspective, as is the case in Chapter 3, framing the relationship between audience and performance as being in opposition to UK theatre etiquette cultures. However, it is imperative to understand that much like the dramaturgical frameworks it functions within,

[68] Nick Walker, *Neuroqueer: An Introduction* (2021) https://neuroqueer.com/neuroqueer-an-introduction/ [Accessed 13,1,2022].
[69] Ibid.

neuroqueer is a fluid malleable term that works best because it refuses to be pinned down by one singular definition. Walker writes that:

any effort to establish an' "authoritative" definition of neuroqueer is in some sense inherently doomed and ridiculous, simply because the sort of people who identify as neuroqueer and engage in neuroqueering tend to be the sort of people who delight in subverting definitions, concepts, and authority[70]

Neuroqueerness is an anti-hierarchical practice that seeks to challenge neuronormative rhetoric on neurodivergence, and instead to inverse and turn in on itself those problematic rhetorical approaches. Walker, in her blog post originally introducing the concept of neuroqueerness, lays out eight practices that can be defined as part of engaging in neuroqueerness:

1. Being both neurodivergent and queer, with some degree of conscious awareness and/or active exploration around how these two aspects of one's being entwine and interact (or are, perhaps, mutually constitutive and inseparable).

2. Embodying and expressing one's neurodivergence in ways that also queer one's performance of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or other aspects of one's identity.

3. Engaging in practices intended to undo and subvert one's own cultural conditioning and one's ingrained habits of neuronormative and heteronormative performance, with the aim of reclaiming one's capacity to give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations.

4. Engaging in the queering of one's own neurocognitive processes (and one's outward embodiment and expression of those processes) by intentionally altering them in ways that

[70] Ibid.

create significant and lasting increase in one's divergence from prevailing cultural standards of neuronormativity and heteronormativity.

5. Approaching, embodying, and/or experiencing one's neurodivergence as a form of queerness (e.g., in ways that are inspired by, or similar to, the ways in which queerness is understood and approached in Queer Theory, Gender Studies, and/or queer activism).

6. Producing literature, art, scholarship, and/or other cultural artifacts that foreground neuroqueer experiences, perspectives, and voices.

7. Producing critical responses to literature and/or other cultural artifacts, focusing on intentional or unintentional characterizations of neuroqueerness and how those characterizations illuminate and/or are illuminated by actual neuroqueer lives and experiences.

8. Working to transform social and cultural environments in order to create spaces and communities – and ultimately a society – in which engagement in any or all of the above practices is permitted, accepted, supported, and encouraged.[71]

Freely expressing our autistic traits is a direct neuroqueer practice of the neuronormative rhetorical approaches that other us. Quirky dramaturgy provides the opportunities for autistics to be themselves and create holistic, diverse and accessible pieces of performance that celebrate and champion autistic people and stand in contrast to neuronormative rhetoric that would seek to erase autistic identities altogether. In Chapter 2, neuroqueerness is shown to achieve this by altering the neuronormative logics of a space, using access changes so that autistic people engage with relaxed environments that validate their experiences as autistics. Chapter 3 includes discussions about how participatory and immersive performance worlds neuroqueer neuronormative ideas of autistic cognition, opposing theory of mind and the ableist misconceptions about autism it has manifested.

[71] Ibid.

In Chapter 4 I discuss how neuroqueerness engages with the performance practices of Cian Binchy and Xandri Selwyn to create dystopian futures inhabited by satirical personas, neuroqueering neuronormative notions around infantilisation and gender. Finally, in Chapter 5 I emphasise the championing of autistic people by using festivals and curated artistic online spaces as hubs that allow for autistic people to mobilise and engage with one another, discarding neuronormative ideas of sociability in place of a framework that is distinctly autistic. Neuroqueerness underscores that there is not one set way of perceiving the world or ourselves, and that autism is a form of neurological queerness that stands in contrast to normative ideas of cognition and identity. As Melanie Yergeau writes;

> Rhetoric comprises how we learn things and how we live. Autism, by contrast, signals the dissolution of such learning. This dissolution is sometimes presented as all-encompassing and at other times is claimed as a matter of degree or severity. We, the autistic, are that which contrasts.[72]

Yergeau writes of autism as a rhetorical and structural contrast to neuronormative rhetoric, and the hierarchical frameworks us autistics navigate and attempt to live within on a daily basis. To try and pass or mask and 'fit in' to align with a neuronormative sensibility of how we should be seen to behave and present ourselves, because the way we behave and see the world is in contrast to a neuronormative perspective. Autism stands in contrast to those dynamics and structures, and emphasises autistic people as disruptive elements. To be autistic and to proudly showcase it is to be in defiance of the structures that seek to silence such behaviours.

The quirky dramaturgical feature of neuroqueerness helps to make visible the autistic individual. It emphasises resistance against heteronormative and neuronormative structures and instead imagines the ways in which our cognition and perspectives as autistic people might reorder the

[72] Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism : On Rhetoric and Neurological* Queerness (Michigan: Duke University Press, 2018) p.6.

logics of the world around us politically and culturally. For the autistic spectator and performer in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, this is of great importance, as normative ideas around autism function both from theoretical frameworks like theory of mind, and legislation by successive UK Conservative governments. This means that quirky dramaturgy is reordering and challenging both cultural and political neuronormative rhetoric. The historical and cultural overlap of both autism and queerness intertwines. As Melanie Yergeau writes: 'Madness and mental disability are inextricable from queer histories'[73] It is important not to stake a claim on queer experiences by seeking to more broadly generalise, but to use the practices to understand the intersections between autistic and queer. The neuroqueer encompasses a broader cognitive spectrum of peoples beyond just autistic people. So neuroqueer is a responsive feature focused on the experience of the neurodivergent individual, and understanding that one's gender or sexuality is just as important a part of the cognitive frameworks and connections that help formulate us as people.

Yergeau argues that; 'autistic rhetorics, in all of their contrastive resonances, queer the motifs, structures, modes, and commonplaces of what nonautistics have come to narrate and thereby know about autism. To author autistically is to author queerly and contrarily.'[74] Yergeau herein draws parallels between autism and queerness, framing autism itself as a form of neurological queerness that through the expression of their own rhetorical approaches to the world, neuroqueers the stereotyped narratives that have come to define autistic people from all walks of life. Autism provides a different structural approach to seeing the world and thinking about the relationship between typical and atypical experiences. It elevates views of diverse spectrums of neurological perceptions as opposed to just trying to be 'normal'. This sort of neuroqueer rhetorical approach creates an effective feedback loop within the structural workings of quirky dramaturgy. Quirky dramaturgy is reflective of autistic rhetorical approaches and a means of restructuring the theatre event in such a way that it can make visible autistic people. Those people then make work or see

[73] Ibid., p.30.
[74] Ibid.

work within a quirky dramaturgical framework, and their autistic responses to the work neuroqueers the more traditional theatrical frameworks that can be restrictive in terms of structural freedom and in catering to different neurological perceptions. In this sense neuroqueering is the act of inverting and challenging the power dynamics that seek to other autistic people.

Herein lies the importance of neuroqueering for autistic audiences within quirky dramaturgy. As Yergeau suggests, 'autism's queer potentials–or entelechies–lie in their defiance and reclamation of the residually rhetorical'[75] Yergeau proposes that autistic resistance against cultural and social structures has a similar linkage to the resistances of the queer against heteronormative structures. Here, one can once again see a connection between the two that permeates with the potentiality of imagining how the neuroqueer might therefore be used for audiences to reimagine the shape of the theatrical event within the realms of the quirky. We might see the neuroqueer to be part of the dramaturgical restructuring that the quirky undertakes when it adapts, alters or shifts the logics of performance to emphasise the articulation of atypical aesthetics. Autism and queerness are therefore linked in terms of both their historical and cultural linkages to atypicality and their resistances against them.

1.11: Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the definition of quirky dramaturgy and presented the key features of its theory and practice. Quirky dramaturgy is a means of making performance that wants to create work made with autistic people in mind. In doing this, quirky dramaturgy makes interventions into traditional theatrical structures, instead creating a new theatregoing framework that can create experiences that best cater for autistic people. The fluid nature of the term dramaturgy helps emphasise the elasticity of the practice and places importance on care and support for audiences and artists being holistic. In the following chapters, I will go into detail with the ways in which these core principles play out in practice through space, audiences, performers and communities to put in

[75] Yergeau, p.32

place the ways in which this practice can positively impact autistic people. The stakes of this project are clear, making theatre accessible and open to autistic people. This thesis will now go into detail into the manners in which this aim can be made possible, how we can make lasting policy change, and how quirky dramaturgy can give other autistic people like myself the chance to express themselves.

Chapter 2: Quirky Dramaturgy and Space

This chapter will examine how the features of quirky dramaturgy operate within the sphere of space, and how this creates accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. By making interventions into the way we see space within the performance event and who has the right to access those spaces, I will illustrate how space can be shaped to reflect autistic perceptions of the world. Space, as Jen Harvie writes 'is socially contested.'[76] For Harvie:

> The ways people and organizations occupy and use space affects crucial social relations of privilege and power, such as who has the right to be where, when; what space is public, what private; who gets to live where; how mixed or segregated groups of people are; and what behaviours are encouraged, permitted, prevented or punished in particular places at particular times.[77]

Harvie articulates here the power dynamics and political tensions of space and the rights of access to space, and what resulting relationships the person and the space have. Within this chapter I will explore and dissect this power relationship between autistic theatregoers, the theatre space, the ways access is provided to those spaces and how quirky dramaturgical practice can create a more holistic approach to spatial access to autistic theatre audiences. I shall examine the state of current autistic friendly performances, referred to as relaxed performances, and the ideologies and polices that underpin them. Through a reading of the ways in which relaxed performances both succeed and fail in creating accessible spaces for autistic spectators, I shall lay out the ways relaxed performance creates spaces that champion autistic advocacy. However, I shall also underline the widespread issues relaxed performances have, and how they fail on an access and policy making level to create adequate numbers of relaxed productions across the UK beyond children's theatre and pantomime,

[76] Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.108.
[77] Ibid.

or when a production has a thematic link to autism. A core example of this is The Southwark Playhouse's 2019 relaxed performance of *All in a Row* and the controversial decision to have an autistic child be portrayed by a puppet.

The puppet from that instant came to be for me an aesthetic manifestation of the disconnect between arts institutions and autistic people. The play itself tells the story of two parents preparing to send their child to a special needs boarding school after social services was contacted. The play situates Laurence as a prop used to develop and attempt to stir sympathy towards his parents, and we are never given any insight into the way in which the character of Laurence perceives the events unfolding. What *All in a Row* presents to us is a dangerous negotiating of the subject and the object within spaces that seek to be accessible to autistic theatregoers. By making the object seek to replicate and stand in for a live autistic body on stage, we are made aware of the profound emptiness and absence within the space, making the relaxed performance as inaccessible and hostile as standard theatre spaces for autistic audiences. What becomes apparent is a total lack of training or understanding for the ways in which to engage with the subject matter both from an artistic and creative perspective, but also an autism access perspective in regard to the singular relaxed performance of the show. This is an example of an aestheticization of the spaces theatre institutions think autistic audiences want, without actively engaging with and seeing what autistic individuals want in terms of access and programming.

The puppet and its backlash from the autistic community underlies this dissonance between theatres and autistic audiences, and becomes a microcosm for the current state of relaxed performance in the UK. Relaxed theatre came into being as a means of providing safe, accessible spaces for autistic theatregoers to enjoy performance within. However, the volume and diversity of relaxed performances across the UK means theatres seldom create the wide sweeping access changes one might at first assume. This does not mean this cannot change though, and with a more robust, unified policy process across the UK, theatre spaces can come to create far reaching access

for autistic audiences that find standard theatre spaces daunting or inhospitable. Within these relaxed performances, audiences should be free to express their autism, and relaxedness can position itself at the forefront of how quirky dramaturgy creates new quirky practices that advocate for autistic spectators. Despite this, relaxed performance at present is situated in mainstream performance as tokenistic. Beyond this, content such as *All in a Row's* puppet, underscores a lack of understanding how problematic content might be deemed offensive and spark responses from autistic audiences within these spaces. By contrast, the late 2018/early 2019 production of *Philip Pullman's Grimm Tales* at The Unicorn Theatre situates a relaxed performance as one of the progenitors of relaxed performance within London. The Unicorn's *Grimm Tales* situates relaxed performance in a much more inclusive and effective manner to the Southwark Playhouse and *All in a Row*. Although this production does not necessarily deal with autism, what I shall construct is a contextual framing of mainstream relaxed performance, that is to say a relaxed performance that is situated in children's theatre, at a theatre very much centre to the relaxed performance theatre movement within London.

The production itself tells the story of a group of children who tell each other fairy tale stories on the night of Christmas Eve, the children acting out the stories as they slowly have to contend with their parents also. In seeing the ways access generates relaxed spaces at The Unicorn, we can make comparative understandings of the ways access is made and autistic audiences engaged with within UK theatre spaces. More so as a children's theatre, we can come to understand how the primary demographic used by relaxed performances engages with these spaces, and how we might think beyond seeing relaxed performance as something tied to children's theatre. As a result, I shall present two theatres working with, in the case of The Unicorn, and working against, in the case of The Southwark Playhouse, quirky dramaturgical practices. I shall present quirky dramaturgies as responding to inclusive arts policy, emphasising quirkiness as a socially engaged aesthetic. However, what shall become apparent throughout this chapter is the numerous issues around genre, volume and variety that affect how effective accessible spaces are for autistic

audiences. These issues in turn can create tensions in how relaxed performances engage with quirky dramaturgy. In engaging with these issues, what can be seen is the interconnected failures that underscore just how important advocacy is for autistic arts access. Ergo, quirky dramaturgy can be used as a means to imagine ways of addressing arts access issues, and creating a more diverse range of relaxed performance across the UK. I argue that by having quirky dramaturgy and its feature engage with space, it will create more effective policy making strategies within the UK. By deconstructing the ways both the Southwark Playhouse and Unicorn Theatre create and provide access within their relaxed spaces, what will be made apparent is how the quirky might be implemented as a form of theatre space for autistic audiences that allows them to freely express themselves outside of a spatial framework that others their cognitive differences. In advocating for quirky dramaturgical practices, we can move towards a means of engaging with audiences that is more elastic and holistic to the individual and their needs, therefore emphasising the need for quirky dramaturgy within UK theatre.

2.1: Defining a Quirky Space

Before deconstructing the relaxed performances at The Southwark Playhouse and The Unicorn, it is imperative to first define and construct an image of how a space is formed using a quirky dramaturgical methodology, and how relaxed performances dramaturgically differ from traditional theatrical events. To do so we must begin to think more broadly and examine the relationship between the individual and theatre architecture. This constructs not just the ways audience and performance are in dialogue with the architecture of the theatre space, but how quirky dramaturgy is understood to be engaging with space not just in terms of the interiority of the theatre, but the exteriority as well. Gurkan Topaloglu constructs this relational reading of body, space and architecture, exploring the ways audience transform theatrical spaces into fictional realities. Topaloglu writes that;

> Space in theatre is used as a tool while space in architecture is manifested as a final product. Even though space is used as a tool in theatre, human body and movement capabilities give its final shape as a produced output. Theatre and architecture overlap in terms of producing space. For the space in theatre, the deterministic character of the body is no different than the body acting as a determinant for the space. With the body, the space gains meaning, while it is shaped with the movement capability of the body. The body transforms the theatrical space from emptiness to a fictional reality.[78]

Topaloglu argues the body of the audience member gives meaning to the theatre space. And this engagement is not simply rooted in the interior of the theatre building, but instead situates meaning over the exteriority of the building as well. Topaloglu argues that the kinaesthetic qualities of the theatregoer intersect with the final product manifested from architectural structures. Topaloglu views theatre spaces themselves as tools, the physical body of the spectator intersecting with the physical body of the architectural structure of the building, shaping meaning within the theatre space.

What Topaloglu proposes is fundamental to how quirky dramaturgy relates to space. What is being unravelled here is the ways in which we might envision the spectator as some architectural body responding to the theatre space, allowing audiences to express their autism freely within the space, emphasising that spaces and their meanings are constructed by the bodies that populate them. These ways of making meaning are not just situated as kinaesthetic elements, but cognitive as well. The cognitive elements of a spectator help one imagine and make readings into the spatial logics they are presented with, making or decoding the meanings we might find within the space. And we might see the brain itself as an architectural body, its cognitive responses a produced output that gives it a final shape similar to the physical responses set forth by Topaloglu. Quirky dramaturgy

[78] Gurkhan Topaloglu, 'Teaching/Learning Strategies Through Art: Theatre and Basic Design Education', *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Vol.182 (13 May, 2015) pp.331-337 (p.333).

is important to understanding space because of the ways cognitive decision making both influence one's physical responses alongside neurological responses. If an autistic spectator's reading of a space and its logics is different from the majority of the other theatregoers within that space, the autistic spectator can be viewed as other or disruptive for not knowing or understanding the logical and fictional meanings of the space they are in. They are in short, producing a neuroqueer reading of space that to those around might seem unproductive or irrational.

We can apply these approaches to architecture to intersect with the quirky dramaturgy, underscoring the relationship between theatre buildings, performance form and spectatorship. As Synne Berndt and Cathy Turner write. 'If dramaturgy concerns the architecture of the theatrical event, we need to look at the ways in which a performance or play is situated within the context of a community, society and the world.'[79] The formation of the performance event, both the structural architecture and the physical body of the theatre building coexist when thinking about how audiences experience live performance. This is an important point to raise, as it underscores relaxed performances and other forms of access policy making for disabled theatregoers as dramaturgical approaches. Likewise, the cognitive and physical qualities of the autistic individual inform the way we conceptualise the form the performance event takes and how we choose to experience it.

Therefore, quirky dramaturgy helps us to understand that space can be created to enable audiences to neuroqueer the ways they relate and respond to spatiality. Hence, cognitive and kinaesthetic responses to the theatre building help to create meaning within a space. It is idiosyncratic and exists outside the remit of how one might more readily expect the logics of that space to operate. The ways autistic people cognitively and physically respond to a space neuroqueer its logics conceptually and physically, creating new meanings that make the space respond to the autistic theatregoer. As a result, quirky dramaturgy uses space to disrupt the use of stage or

[79] Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, Dramaturgy and Performance, Revised Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p.39.

auditorium, be this a technical alteration or logistical adjustment that noticeably alters the way one might perceive or experience the space. Technical elements include keeping house lights on or reducing the intensity of special effects or music. This atypicality might also manifest in more dramatic changes to the space and how audiences and performers are placed within it, moving audiences onto the stage, or performers out into auditoriums or the foyer. The common practice in relaxed performance of live feeds and chill out spaces for overstimulated audience members fulfils a somewhat similar role, although not to the same radical level. In these cases, these live feeds in the foyer for audience members allow for theatregoers to still engage with and enjoy the performance in a quiet, comfortable space while not feeling as if they are missing out on the performance within the auditorium.

Jacques Rancière writes about more radical changes to theatre spaces, talking about the transcendent nature of challenging and reconfirming the logics of space within the theatre auditorium. Rancière argues that;

> The separation of stage and auditorium is something to be transcended. The precise aim of the performance is to abolish this exteriority in various ways: by placing the spectators on the stage and the performers in the auditorium; by abolishing the difference between the two; by transferring the performance to other sites; by identifying it with taking possession of the street, the town or life.[80]

Rancière's renegotiation of the distribution of space within the theatre auditorium seeks to break down the exterior and interior of the theatre, bringing into the auditorium the social reality of the world outside. And consequently, Rancière also sees that theatre being taken out onto the streets, breaking down the interior and exterior of theatre venue and the streets. Rancière views the theatre not as a physical architectural structure, but instead imagines the theatre as a metaphysical space that might be situated anywhere an audience might will it to be. Rancière sees theatre as an idea,

[80] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans, Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2011) p.15.

something to transcend the physical boundaries of the theatre building. Rancière's writing emulates the meaning making of Topaloglu, and constructs an extreme critical example of imagining the ways the quirky dramaturgy manifests and creates new atypical performance spaces outside of the architectural structures of the theatre. Although most relaxed performances that adhere to a quirky dramaturgical framework do not typically go to such extreme degrees of alteration to space, indeed doing so might be potentially more stressful for an autistic spectator, Rancière does situate space, in particular the exterior and interior relationships a theatre space might have, as part of a socially engaged theatrical experience. And indeed, the ways spatial logics alter to create accessible spaces emphasises the socially engaged nature of quirky dramaturgy.

Quirky dramaturgy should create safe spaces that are not only external manifestations of those whose cognition are deemed other and atypical, but spaces wherein autistic people feel free to express and be themselves, and in doing so neuroqueering neuronormative frameworks. Quirky dramaturgy is situated within inclusive theatre practice, and seeks to create accessible and safe sites for autistic audiences to express themselves and engage with performance. Jessica Watkin defines inclusiveness in theatre spaces as being 'thoughtfully designed to support all of the abilities of the people who work and visit it.'[81] Watkin theorises inclusive practice as a means to diversify and create access to all theatregoers and to create experiences within theatre spaces that are both pleasurable and flexible to individual needs. Although within the context of this chapter we are interested in autistic arts access, it is important to understand autism as part of a spectrum of different individual needs. Beyond this there are many other neurodivergent and learning-disabled people who also gain much value from the accessible spaces quirky dramaturgy seeks to create. Quirky dramaturgy is not an overtly specific piece of access policy, but rather a theory and practice that seeks to work with access policies and theatres to create inclusive spaces. Quirky dramaturgy creates access not just through the physical alterations to a space or production, but through the promise of safety to

[81] Jessica Watkin, 'Inclusive Theatre Space: Bursting Through Boundaries of Spatial Restrictions, One Project at a Time,' *Canadian Theatre Review*, Vol.170 (Spring, 2017) pp.103-107 (p.103).

express one's self within that space as well. A quirky dramaturg must understand their audience, understand their interlinking atypicality within neuronormative models of thinking about cognitive function, and understand their experiences navigating other spaces that autistic individuals might find inaccessible.

2.2: *All in a Row* and Access Failures

All in a Row provides a prime example of the ways in which theatre and performance can misunderstand their audience, and through this criticism, we can think about how to better understand audience engagement with spatial access. *All in a Row* situates itself as a prime example of the numerous tensions and issues surrounding access, education and representation both in relaxed and non-relaxed spaces for autistic audiences. What is most striking and unsettling about The Southwark Playhouse's production of *All in a Row* is not the bright neon lights and pieces of string made to mimic brain synapses, but the rather grotesque grey velvet puppet, chosen by writer Alex Oates, director Dominic Shaw and puppet designer Sian Kidd, to represent the heavily autistic character of Laurence within the play. The puppet itself was cause for much controversy within autistic communities across social media platforms, causing attention within mainstream press and sparking a small protest outside the theatre during the production's opening night. The loud vocalisation of the puppeteer as he attempts to mimic the sounds of a heavily autistic child adds to complicate and make visible an uncomfortable silencing of the autistic experience.

The actors came on stage beforehand to welcome and explain how the relaxed performance would work. Of note was the option to leave and re-enter the auditorium if needed, as opposed to the no readmissions policy of the standard performance. There was a certain palpable tension, which was elevated when the actors introduced the audience to the puppet of Laurence before the start of the performance. In fact, the relaxed performance and standard performance of the production had little in terms of discernible difference. Lighting for the relaxed performance at the Southwark Playhouse was inconsistent, at times the bright neon squares at the back of the stage

would continue to flash and glow during transitions with the same intensity as the standard performance. During transitions, they would flash brightly and alternate colours, which for whatever reason for myself in the audience, felt more jarring and uncomfortable visually to look at during the relaxed performance as opposed to the standard performance. At other times the squares were turned off, or heavily toned down, but there was not a uniformed sense that a clear artistic, and importantly access, choice had been made. This lack of uniformity highlights how effective the quirky can be in terms of creating a more uniformed sense of a space being inclusive. House lights however were kept on dim for the relaxed performance, the only consistent change made throughout the entirety of the relaxed performance. No visual story was provided, an added irony as Laurence's family constantly tries to find the right time to sit down and read him his social story for his journey to his new special needs boarding school the following day, and the only resource available was a brief word document available on the day of the relaxed performance. And despite a chill out zone for autistic audiences in the bar if they felt overstimulated and wished to leave, they were welcomed with an uncomfortable wooden bench and table at the back of the bar that was reserved for them. Further still, despite claiming they were toning down the intensity for several scenes in which actors shout quite aggressively, no discernible differences between standard and relaxed performances could be made. By applying clear aesthetic choices to a space, ones that intersect with artistic decisions made within the auditorium, relaxed performances can be seen as more than access outreach. And applying quirky dramaturgy to the wider theatre space, the foyer, the bar and so forth, can begin to imagine the ways in which people can freely interact in spaces designed to accommodate them and promote autistic self-expression.

The lack of access alongside a solitary relaxed performance during the entire run of the production positions autistic individuals and the encouragement of quirky spaces secondary to selling an ill-conceived, ableist representation of an autistic individual to neurotypical audiences. The aims for the production seem to capitalise on the public appetite for autistic stories within the media that seek to fetishize the autistic individual. To this extent, it was apparent there was a distinct lack

of training on how to best create access or best deal with the material in a way that would not cause backlash. Instead, whatever the initial intention might be, the optics of seeing an autistic child reduced to a puppet, situates Laurence not as an autistic person but as a product and an object to fetishize and sell. As such, the aims for the relaxed performance of *All in a Row* seeks to justify ableist artistic decisions, or rather justify why the decisions and choices taken are not ableist but instead being representative and ethical to the representation of autism on stage. Sian Kidd, the puppet designer for the production, defends the choice for making Laurence a puppet, arguing that:

> As many notable productions concerning neurodiversity have endeavoured to capture, the autism spectrum is not reducible to one single story, person or narrative. Therefore, we felt it was necessary to integrate creative strategies beyond straightforward actor representation. There were impossible practicalities to navigate for Laurence to be portrayed by an autistic child actor. The unsettling effect of any child's presence in the role raises many ethical and legal dilemmas.[82]

Kidd proposes a number of reasons as to why Laurence became a puppet. Firstly, proposing autism as a spectrum, and the experiences of a single autistic individual is not reducible to be seen as shared experience. Secondly, that there would be serious ethical issues in putting an autistic child in the role, more so considering the subject matter. In the form of a puppet, Kidd argues she has made an artistic choice that resolves both these concerns. As she develops, 'We see the over-staged child, in which we struggle to truly invest. Ultimately a depiction of a profound neuro-disability by any actor would detract focus from the story we are trying to tell.'[83] Kidd here makes a sweeping assumption that any actor attempting to play the part of Laurence would deter from the action on stage. Kidd makes sweeping neurological assumptions about the actor. Might not an adult autistic actor be able to play the role? Age play after all, is a common practice within theatre.

[82] Sian Kidd, quoted in, *All in A Row Programme* (London: Southwark Playhouse, 2019) p.3.
[83] Ibid.

Alex Oates, the writer of the play, continues with the problematic reasoning behind the choice of the puppet. Oates reasons that:

> Laurence is one autistic character with an extremely profound learning disability and set of behaviours including violence. He is by no means intended to be a representative of the whole autistic spectrum and the people within it. I'm a massive supporter of inclusivity in art; I'm currently working on three different projects that feature learning disabled performers, all playing characters with the same disability as their own. I believe people with learning disabilities should be given the chance to tell their own stories and the stories of others wherever appropriate. Laurence Is a character with a level of disability that would make it impossible for him to appear in a play, especially a play like this one.[84]

There is a lot to unpackage here in Oates's defence of the puppet of Laurence. Certainly, the most immediate and troubling piece of rationale by Oates is that the role of Laurence is impossible to play because of the degree of his autism. Such an assumption amounts to ableism, assuming the role is unable to be played, or an adult autistic actor, is unable to perform the role. This ableist tone reverberates throughout. Oates draws attention to his othered behaviours and bouts of 'violence'. Again, there is a dangerous formulation and assumption by neurotypicals about the functionality of the neurodivergent brain. More so when the depiction of his autism within the play never seems to go beyond defecation, biting and ordering cakes on the floor by colour. Replacing the subject with cultural and historical caricatures evokes arguments made by eugenics, by situating the autistic individual as some bestial other that has destroyed the lives of two 'loving' neurotypical parents. The dialogue, experiences and representations are inverted upon their proposed logics, and we are instead faced with a play that has reduced autistic people to an object. The representation of Laurence is underscored by a sense of emptiness, exactly because we are never once presented with his own unique perspective of how events are unfolding with the family, and because we are

[84] Alex Oates, quoted in, *All in A Row Programme*, (London: Southwark Playhouse,2019) p.2.

inherently made aware of the absence of the autistic body on stage though an object trying to reproduce the subjective experience of the autistic individual.

Artist and disabled arts advocate Jess Thom disagrees with the logics of the production team, arguing that, 'An autistic actor would bring additional lived expertise to the role without it being necessary for them to precisely match the same degree of impairment as the character.'[85] Thom here argues that rather than be an ethics issue in employing an autistic actor for the role, instead the casting of an autistic actor would have brought much needed lived experience about the autistic experience to the role. Thom continues, arguing that:

> Behaviour is a form of communication, and challenging behaviour often communicates an unmet need. That need may be practical, emotional or sensory. It might be shocking to non-disabled people, but for me and many others it's part of everyday personal and professional life. Seeing diversity of communication and behaviour on stage may help non-disabled people better understand how disabled people live. The idea that this is more palatably presented by a puppet is hurtful and misses a vital opportunity for authentic representation.[86]

Thom raises an invaluable counterpoint by addressing the need to draw attention to othered behaviours that do not conform to typical ways of being. The way autistic people might act might seem 'disruptive' to neurotypical individuals; however, this is far from the case. There are varied ways of being that are not any more or less wrong than the other. The construction of a puppet as a response to fears of the behavioural other, ensures that instead of improving visibility, they have compounded their lack of it. If the role is disruptive of a preconceived understanding of the functionality of an actor both in terms of behaviour and language, then the role appears to be relegated to object. The puppet of Laurence becomes an apt metaphor for the failure to engage not just with subject and object, but the ways in which they are made accessible. A solitary relaxed

[85] Jess Thom, 'Who's In The Rows?', www.touretteshero.com, https://www.touretteshero.com/2019/02/17/whos-in-the-rows/ [Accessed 15/3/19]
[86] Ibid

performance does not equate to adequate access for autistic audiences, more so when the show attempts to heavy handily navigate the topic of autism.

It is apparent then that *All in a Row* is a quirky dramaturgical failure, with a form that evokes ableist understandings of autistic people. *All In a Row* is a perfect articulation of Yergeau's criticism of neuronormative rhetoric towards autism and the hijacking of autistic discourses. It is clear that the relaxed performance of *All in a Row* does not abide by the practices of quirky dramaturgy because of the clear dissonance between the space and the audience it was trying to engage with. Despite the superficial alterations, it was apparent that the production had not taken into account autistic audiences, as we were situated within a space with below bare minimum access changes and a puppet that was both grotesque and upsetting to autistic individuals. This meant that relaxed space created at the Southwark Playhouse was deeply superficial in terms of access and accommodation to autistic people. 'The State of Theatre Access 2017' emphasises this shallow access practice as being a national issue, with the report stating that while 72% of theatres in the UK provided online access information, only 17% of the theatres in the UK offered relaxed performances to their audiences[87]. The report finds that 'the figure of 17% compares well with other types of access service given the relative youth of relaxed performances in the UK.'[88] However, access policy beyond that of relaxed performance is damning within the report, and paints a bleak image of theatre access, that contextualises how 'good' the percentage of relaxed performances across the UK is. Audio described performances and BSL signed performances are offered at only 25% of UK theatres, while captioned performances are offered at 21% of UK theatres.[89] The findings and conclusions made are damning, with the report concluding that;

> Access performances are only a success if they are properly supported and championed at a senior level in an arts organisation […] Budgets are often cited as a reason for not providing

[87] Matthew Cock, Kirsty Hoyle, Melanie Sharpe, 'State of Theatre Access 2017' (Manchester: Arts Council England, 2017), p18.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., pp.9-15.

access services. This should be challenged: access and audience development should be included within budgets from the start, and with strategic partnerships and creative access solutions, most venues can afford to do more than they currently do.[90]

2.3: State of Theatre Access

'The State of Theatre Access 2019' report comparatively showcases a small net increase in theatres offering at least one relaxed performance to 20%, with 126 theatres offering at least one relaxed performance, with London offering on average more relaxed performances for 31% of its productions, above the national average of 13%. in 2017.[91] Alongside this, the report found 11 new theatres had begun providing relaxed performances.[92] On the surface, the report serves to show an increase in theatres offering relaxed performance in London. However, despite offering above the national average in terms of the quantity of relaxed performances each production might receive, the number of theatres within London offering relaxed performances has dropped to 15%, placing it below the national average of 20%.[93] That is a 7% drop from 2017. By comparison the other three regions above the 13% average for the number of relaxed performances per production each saw a rise in the number of relaxed performances theatres were offering.[94] The East Midlands sits at 25%, up 16% from 2017, Scotland sits at 11%, up from 5%, and the South East is at 30%, up from 20%.[95] Of the four regions, London is the only region to see a drop in theatres offering relaxed performances. Within the context of these two reports, the space at The Southwark is situated within a continuum that forces us to engage with the ways in which access policy and perceptions of autism inform the ways that those identities are often situated as ghostly stand-ins for live bodies. Accommodation seems to only go so far in that access might be situated within children's theatre, pantomime or

[90] Ibid., p.29
[91] Matthew Cock, Matthew Pountney, Melanie Sharpe, Nicky Taylor, Jess Thom, *State of Theatre Access 2019* (Manchester: Arts Council England, 2019) p.42.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., p.43.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

thematically linked works, and that diversity and quantity fails in its perceived attempts of access. *All in a Row* as a relaxed production is a microcosm of the ways in which theatres fail in creating accessible spaces for autistic audiences

'The State of Theatre Access Report' of 2021 ('The Theatre Access Survey') has no data on the state of UK relaxed performances due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the paralysing effects it had upon the UK arts sector. Instead, the report focuses on online performance access during the pandemic (which shall be broken down in Chapter 5 of this thesis). However, as the result of the pandemic and the closure of UK theatres, relaxed performances shrunk drastically between 2020 and 2021 as access had to be rethought in relation to a global pandemic, reaffirming the importance of theatre companies engaging with audiences to provide holistic access and care for autistic theatregoers. Watkin argues that:

> The relationship created between theatre companies and their audiences are always important but take on particular significance in relation to disabled audiences. In general theatre companies express an expected, inherent respect for inclusion, but this attitude is often complicated by a Catch-22: one can argue that there is no need for inclusive theatre spaces because no audience members attending performances need accommodations, but potential audience members in need of accommodation are often unaware that such accommodation are available and so do not attend performances. The predicament does not arise from a lack of desire for inclusive performance but from lower-than-expected attendance and involvement by the desired audiences for whom they created.[96]

Watkin lays out a certain tension between accessible theatre spaces and those who provide them. How might theatres provide access if audiences might not be aware that accessible spaces like relaxed performances exist? Although Watkin is speaking more generally about access from a Canadian theatrical context, nonetheless such an argument can be somewhat problematic in that it

[96] Watkin, pp.103-107 (p.103).

involves arguing audiences do not know such spaces exist. It is much more productive to explore the ways in which theatres can use quirky dramaturgy to create relaxed environments for autistic audiences. And more specifically, it is more productive to examine the ways in which the lack of programme diversity for relaxed performances and tokenistic access policies restricts the degree of positive change such spaces can bring to autistic theatregoers. *All in a Row* situates itself at the periphery of this issue. Poorly communicated and tokenistic access, alongside minimal engagement with the community it represents, unless the production is defending the puppet of Laurence, illustrates a performance that is more concerned with autism as an object to sell and market for the theatregoing public.

Understanding the access failings of *All in a Row's* relaxed performance is to understand what inherently makes it very clearly against the aims of quirky dramaturgy, and situates the tensions and issues of relaxed performance. If theatres do not actively engage in meaningful and thoughtful ways with those they seek to give access to, we greatly restrict the level of access to theatre spaces for autistic audiences. *All in a Row* exemplifies the spatial tension between the ways relaxed performances are quirky and the way in which this particular production is situated as ableist and tokenistic. In much the same way one might ascertain what makes or does not make a relaxed performance, it is important to use *All in a Row* as an example to establish what does not follow quirky dramaturgy and provide cultural context for the state of relaxed performances situated outside children's theatre.

The ableist content and access failings of *All In a Row* alongside these damning pieces of data brings to life the argument brought forward by Gay McAuley that:

> Theatre buildings incorporate within themselves indications of the practices they are designed to house: the arrangement of the auditorium and the nature of the other social spaces in the

building reveal a great deal about the theatregoing experience from the spectators' point of view.[97]

What spaces like those at The Southwark Playhouse showcase are the ways in which audiences and theatres have a distinct disconnect. That such productions and such poor access were allowed within The Southwark Playhouse, certainly situates the theatre as being just as much as culpable of the failures of the production as those who made the artistic and access decisions. This does not make The Southwark Playhouse some sinister site of ableist ideologies, but it does situate the theatre as lacking in understanding on how to approach relaxed performances and autistic audiences. As such, The Southwark Playhouse is part of a much broader, cultural problem about the ways in which theatres think about spaces for autistic audiences.

Gay McAuley develops her argument by proposing that: 'The space is, of course not an empty container but an active agent; it shapes what goes on within it, emits signals about it to the community at large, and is itself affected.'[98] The relaxed performance of *All In a Row* concisely crystallises this proposition brought forward by McAuley. The space and the production taking place within it was shaped both by access and by production decisions that are then engaged with by the autistic community. The resultant response by the autistic community online, alongside a small protest on the opening night of the production, highlights the ways in which the Southwark Playhouse and *All in a Row* were both impacted by the production. It also highlights how horribly wrong access and inclusive arts practice can go sometimes, and situates quirky dramaturgy as an important component of creating effective arts access that emphasises advocacy for autistic audiences over the ableist depictions and poorly conceived relaxed space of *All in a Row*. Quirky dramaturgy turns a space into a container for its cultural and political histories of atypicality that now takes residence within it. A relaxed space for quirky dramaturgy is turned into an archive,

[97] Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999) p.37.
[98] Ibid., p.41.

containing within how autistic people might have engaged with the space previously, and how that translates into the present. This underscores both the ways in which the space was and how it now is, and how the access and work existing within the space might be used to communicate to autistic audiences a sense of safety and inclusiveness. If we were to restage a new production of *All in a Row* within The Southwark Playhouse, we might consider the ways in which access failed during its initial run, such as the lack of relaxed performances for a show representing autistic people, a lack of digital resources, no chill out zone, triggering content and noise alongside potential sensory triggers such as the neon lights. From there we could repurpose those spaces to engage with quirky dramaturgy. We might think of adding a television screen outside the theatre auditorium for those who wish to leave the space, but still want to watch the performance. We might have a lighter wash on the lights on the back, so as to articulate the colours without the same uncomfortable intensity. Likewise, sound effects would be milder, and actors more clearly informed about a respectable level of noise for their performances. We could add a visual story that allows audiences to engage with the theatre space and the production both before, during and after their visit. We might think of what a chill out space would actually look like, including bean bags to sit on, sensory toys, a little curtain to break the space off from the bar, and headphones if the space becomes too loud. We might think about an autistic actor for the role of Laurence, creating more representation and less offensive and stressful visual stimuli within the auditorium. The production's content and access could certainly have been accessible had the theatre engaged more effectively with their audience, had they understood the spatial logics they were undertaking, and had they approached the production as a whole as a manifestation of the quirky. However, the Southwark Playhouse's relaxed performance paints a picture of the ways in which access to inclusive spaces for autistic audiences is often dependent on the willingness of the theatres providing the access.

2.4: Issues with Relaxed Performance

All in a Row highlights that there are issues when it comes to relaxedness within current UK arts access practices, something quirky dramaturgy's interactions with space aims to reform. For Fletcher-Watson, relaxed performance presents its own issues around access. Speaking of his experience as a spectator with his non-autistic daughter at a relaxed performance of *The Lion King* in Edinburgh, Fletcher-Watson asks 'should 'neurotypicals' like me and my daughter be allowed to go to such performances, taking up seats put aside for people who are normally not made welcome in the theatre?'[99] Fletcher-Watson raises the concern that if neurotypical spectators end up taking up seating for performances designed for those who might not find a standard performance accessible, ultimately autistic spectators will find themselves facing the same issue of access to theatre which they are currently faced with. Would the removal of the current social scripting within theatres simply lead to a new spectatorship paradigm that would push autistic spectators out again? Fletcher-Watson's concerns are valid, but his concern of an incompatibility between neurodivergent and neurotypical spectators appears to be placed in fears of feeling to be intruding on a space made for autistic spectators, due to current theatre etiquette ostracising them.

Vanessa Brooks's *Separate Doors 2* paints a more damning verdict about relaxed performance, instead claiming relaxed performances segregate audiences. Brooks argues that: 'A generation of young people with learning disabilities who happily watch Dr.Who on TV at home with their friends and family are being segregated from the rest of society in theatre via relaxed performances.'[100] Brooks's concerns lie in the fear that relaxed performance is not about access and support, as much as removing 'undesirable' audiences from the standard theatre auditorium. Relaxed performance has the risk of becoming less about diversifying spectatorship in theatres, than about segregating disabled audience members. If the languages and discourse of relaxed

[99] Ben Fletcher-Watson, 'Relaxed Performance: audiences with autism in mainstream theatre', *The Scottish Journal of Performance*, Vol.2 (June,2015) pp.61-89 (p.70)
[100] Vanessa Brooks, *Separate Doors 2: Training, Casting, Representation and Actors with Learning Disabilities in UK Theatre* (Manchester: Arts Council England, 2017) p.4

performance come to be defined by institutions as opposed to artists and spectators, there is a risk that these institutionalised relaxed performances will only further propagate ableist misconceptions. Brooks continues:

> An idea of all people with learning disabilities being the same, and of neurological differences being identical to learning disabilities and all people in this perceived 'bracket' being in need of sensory accommodation and therefore all theatre auditoria containing people with learning disabilities needing qualifications such as adapted lighting and sound and a reduction of pulse quickening content is encouraging a theatre autocracy and a sometimes lacklustre offer for adults with learning disabilities who like their drama as well buttered and ramped up as the next person. Work which is powerful, visual, has an accessible and compelling narrative and is excellent will reach people with all kinds of learning disabilities." [101]

Brooks argues that the technical access adaptations made by relaxed performances make assumptions about the wants and needs of the spectator. Beyond this, she proposes that such elements make sweeping assumptions about a number of different disabilities or neurological differences, placing them under the same umbrella without consideration for the ways in which these audiences might want to engage with performance. It most certainly is true that relaxed performance is framed as autism friendly, and *All in a Row* in particular makes sweeping assumptions and characterisations about autism. However, the power should lie in the hands of artists and spectators to utilise the aspects of relaxed performance they feel best suit them, creating greater elasticity for how relaxed performances are created. It is not to say under quirky dramaturgy one might not adapt spatial requirements to suit the needs of another neurodivergent or disabled group of people. Certainly, it is presumptive to think that creating access to theatre spaces means all autistic audiences need relaxed performance to see performance, as is the same for any other disabled or neurodivergent person. I personally find myself attending performances weekly in a

[101] Ibid.

plethora of wide-ranging mediums. But likewise, we must also understand that there are those that do find non-relaxed performances inhospitable for them, meaning quirky dramaturgy is important for providing relaxed spaces that are flexible to their needs.

Fletcher-Watson and Shaun May directly challenge the claims made by Brooks, writing in opposition to her claim that relaxed performances segregate audiences in their report for the 2017 Autism Arts Festival. Firstly, they argue that:

> there is substantial evidence that autistic people do appreciate adjustments being made to performances. Whilst we think that an ultimate goal of making all performances accessible to all audience members is one worth aspiring to, until that happens (assuming it ever does), events such as the AAF seem necessary.[102]

Indeed, I feel Brooks' claims about disabled people are often generalised and segregated. She herself has laid claim to the assumption that audiences do not appreciate access and support to make their theatre experience enjoyable, comfortable and stress free. To aspire to the artistic and philosophical end point of relaxed performance is also to work in opposition to quirky dramaturgy by imagining some monolithic, strict structure to relaxedness, which is antithetical to the practice as it disregards any sense of flexibility or agency for the autistic theatregoer. Fletcher-Watson and May also argue that;

> a key strand of performer feedback centred on the idea that the AAF was an autistic space, in the same mode as Autreat and Autscape, and thus performing there was an affirmative and political experience. This indicates that, even if the festival became unnecessary on grounds of accessibility, the political dimension relating to the autistic community coming together in solidarity and celebration might nonetheless be of great value.[103]

[102] Ben Fletcher-Watson and Shaun May, 'Enhancing Relaxed Performance: Evaluating the Autism Arts Festival', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol.23 (May, 2018) pp.406-420 (p.418).
[103] Ibid.

Even if the end point of relaxed performance is ultimately met, to therefore eradicate such sites on the basis of potential segregation is ludicrous, and serves only to dilute the political aspects of quirky dramaturgy. In such instances, having sites of coming together and celebration helps to reinforce autistic identities and experiences, and can help generate and promote new and exciting work. If we stop thinking about how autistic individuals do or do not interact with audiences, we can instead think of the radicalism and advocacy that is rooted in quirky dramaturgy.

However, there are a few core matters beyond this short evaluation that certainly raises issues of how relaxed performance advocates for autistic audiences at the moment. One of the primary concerns is that sites of neuronormative power will skew how radical relaxed performances can be, more so when they are often adapted from standard productions. As Fletcher-Watson analyses after his relaxed viewing of *The Lion King*:

> Walking through the lobby, I noticed a large merchandising stand by the exit doors. For a moment, I was taken aback by the incursion of commercialism at this special event, but this could be considered part of the 'mainstreaming' of autism-friendly theatre: when people with autism are welcomed into venues, they become consumers as well as audiences."[104]

Fletcher-Watson conjures an image of the mainstream relaxed performance as a site that seeks to transform autistic spectators into consumers. In the case of *All in a Row*, this is taken to the extreme end point of making autistic people an object to be marketed and sold to paying audiences. In making relaxed work that is adapted from standard mainstream performance, and situating it within these commercial sites, relaxed performance appears to lose the potential political radicalism previously suggested in place of a more neoliberal, commercial form of autistic space and autistic experience. Such relaxed performances also situate spatial access less as an act of advocacy on the part of the individual, and more an attempted act of normalization on the behalf of the institution.

[104] Fletcher-Watson, p.72

Robert J Flynn and Raymond Lemay expand upon this concept of disability and normalisation, writing that:

> All social changes require an ideology to support the economic rationality underpinning them. So, the ideology underpinning the rise of the institution was ultimately a medical and therapeutic one; accordingly; placing people in institutions was not only good for the health of individuals, it was also the good for the health of society. Normalization, it can be argued, is the ideology (or one of the ideologies) that allowed people to be returned to the community in that they can be "normalized" or, in its later variant, be allocated normal social roles. After all, we do not want the different, the deviant, or even the dangerous returned to our communities.[105]

There is a schism of sorts within relaxed performance in that access is decided by creatives within productions, as opposed to any real policy. And while artistic decisions are important to taking seriously relaxed performance not simply as access, but as a space that is part of an aesthetic that seeks to emphasise autistic self-advocacy, the lack of consistent relaxed performances outside of children's theatre situates autistic access as dependent on genre. In fact, in 2014, 54% of relaxed performance was children's theatre, with pantomime making up 22%. That is, only 24% of theatre nationwide in that year was from another genre.[106] With this contextual backdrop of the access policy failures of UK theatre, the spaces that do manifest from relaxed performance can become politically charged acts of advocacy. Despite this though, when productions outside of relaxed performance's narrow genre remit are staged, they are often all linked to autism thematically in some manner, the volume of relaxed showings are minimal, and the access for these events poor. Within these spaces, politicised acts of self-expression are secondary to tokenistic access, and the experience of the autistic spectator secondary within these spaces to the needs and wants of the institutions that house said event. Large theatres within the UK seldom constantly host relaxed

[105] Robert Flynn, Lemay Raymond*, A Quarter Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization* (Ottawa: Ottawa Press, 1999) p.166
[106] Fletcher-Watson, p.69

performances, due to the potential cost of adaptation and loss in revenue in ticket sales unless the performance is somehow thematically linked to autism in some aspect. This is testament to the reach of the misconceived notions still today about neurodivergent individuals.

And so, to first see relaxed performances as a flexible inclusive theatrical practice interested in providing accessible spaces for autistic audiences, we must provide a degree of clarity on the intent of relaxedness, which is the comfort and safety it provides to people with autism. Fletcher-Watson concedes that 'the status of RP [relaxed performance] is less clear.'[107] Despite this, he does muse that 'Its distinctiveness may yet develop further as the movement grows and practice becomes codified.'[108] Some groups, such as The Royal Society of London Theatre and The London Theatrical Managerial Association are trying to codify relaxed performances, with Access Theatre London writing that:

> The Royal Society of London Theatre and the Theatrical Management Association are working in partnership with the Prince's Foundation to Children and the Arts to develop a best practice model for 'Relaxed Performances', including an official logo and 'How To' toolkits.[109]

The development and clarification of meaning Fletcher-Watson speaks about is quirky dramaturgy, and with better defined paradigms and policy taken up throughout the country, we can have a clearer understanding of what is a relaxed performance, and by implication what is not a relaxed performance. Despite the many subversive ways in which relaxed performance frames how we might spectate, it is clear still that at this time, relaxed performance is still a relatively young and new movement, with a plethora of teething problems and no real codified language or consistent policy making. This is why quirky dramaturgy alleviates these issues by having a theory and practice with defined features and functions, meaning relaxed performances will create less poorly conceived

[107] Fletcher-Watson, p.77
[108] Ibid.
[109] Access London Theatre, *Your Guide to Putting on Assisted Performance* (London: Society of London Theatre, 2014) p.6

spatial logics like *All in a Row* that problematise the relationship between the theatres offering access and the autistic audiences they aim to provide it for.

2.5: *Grimm Tales* and Children's Theatre

The Unicorn's *Grimm Tales* portrays a different picture of relaxed performance to that of *All in a Row,* making use of space to create a more carefully thought-out experience for autistic theatregoers. The atmosphere felt very calm, parents and their children ordering drinks, a chill out section for autistic children to go if they were overstimulated and wanted to play and relax in a less busy part of the foyer. This is indeed already a significant improvement over the Southwark Playhouse, and showcases a good understanding on the part of The Unicorn that relaxed spaces do not just account for the auditorium, but all aspects of the performance event. Digital resources online for the show gave children time to engage with the show before they arrived, making them feel more comfortable and familiar, helping impose a sense of sameness. The theatre however did not provide any assistance on site for needs such as headphones for loud noises, and families were expected to bring their own to the performance event. As well as this, hand driers in the toilet were left on, which indeed might have been triggering for any hypersensitive autistic individuals. A bell signalled for children and families to their seats and to signal the start of the show, and certainly was a welcoming change for me personally, having found loudspeakers to often be rather intrusive to my senses as an autistic person. I was concerned by the fact that seating arrangements were allotted, not really giving children the chance to move if they felt uncomfortable where they were sitting due to proximity to the performance or other spectators, which certainly raised the potential risk of anxiety via unwanted social interaction. I had one very agitated and uncomfortable child kicking the back of my seat throughout the performance, and one of the little boys sitting with his mother ended up sitting on the floor, finding it more comfortable as opposed to sitting in a chair. The house lights stayed on a dimmed setting throughout the performance, which again made sure that sensory elements were not too intrusive. However, the show still decided to leave within the performance a

moment of strobe lighting, a dangerous oversight that might have triggered one of the many autistic spectators within the auditorium. Despite the show's warnings of the use of strobe lighting, it therefore made apparent that it was not as readily accessible as one might have at first thought. The show was therefore not accessible to any autistic children within the UK that suffer with some form of epilepsy. Despite these oversights, it was apparent from the laughter and roaring of the children within the auditorium that they were actively engaged and enjoying the show, revelling with particular glee at the gore of one fairy-tale when a child had his head cut off by his evil and scheming step mother. Actors responded well to a young boy near the front talking to them on one occasion, engaging with him in a manner that felt both organic, keeping the flow of the performance, and not dismissing the child. However, as the show continued, the duration of the performance certainly felt too much for a number of the children within the audience, unable to keep their attention, fidgeting and becoming unruly. As the final story was being told, the mother sitting next to me was trying to keep her young son calm as he fidgeted and scuttered down on the floor. Although there were dramaturgical alterations to numerous elements of the show, it became apparent that the temporal elements had been overlooked, and for a number of the children in the audience, it was too much, generating a much more 'on edge' feeling. Maybe finding a way to include an additional interval to break up the action would have been advisable given that there was an admittedly long and dragging second act.

Comparatively speaking, the dramaturgical approach of the standard production of *Grimm Tales* had few discernible differences, the main one being the lack of a chill out area and screen outside streaming the performance inside the theatre auditorium. While technical elements were much more explicit within the standard performance, the strobe lighting effect felt unchanged between standard and relaxed performances. Smoke effects were omitted from the relaxed performance, as well as two sections of the standard performance that were cut and repurposed for the relaxed performance. 'Hansel and Gretel' and their parents walked through the audience for the standard performance, and the story of 'Hans My Hedgehog' ended with a loud, dubstep inspired

song and dance number about hedgehogs. All three of these omissions, smoke and the two parts of the performance, were cut for good reason, the potentiality for unexpected interaction with performers, or overstimulating sensory performance elements, all aimed to make the cuts reasonable and sensible, and ultimately attributed to making it less likely to prove too much for the autistic children within the relaxed version of the performance.

The relaxed performance at The Unicorn was far more considered and considerate to their audiences, and certainly situated the performance event as engaging with quirky dramaturgy. In understanding the ways in which The Southwark Playhouse failed, we also see how The Unicorn succeeded in creating an inclusive space for autistic audiences, despite some notable and questionable choices such as the strobe lighting. Nonetheless the artistic and creative decisions helped to formulate a relaxed performance that takes from the practices of quirky dramaturgy and implements it within their own performance event. I would therefore like to begin by presenting and analysing much more closely the quirky dramaturgy of this particular relaxed performance in conjunction with the ways in which The Southwark Playhouse failed to adhere to a quirky dramaturgy. The Unicorn production of *Grimm Tales* certainly had numerous issues in terms of how access was handled for their relaxed performance, but it was also clear it was engaging with inclusive arts practices and was approaching the space with a quirky dramaturgy.

The Unicorn's relaxed performance's use of visual stories as a means to help children and their families underlines the ways in which *Grimm Tales* was socially engaged with its audience. Digital resources played an important role for The Unicorn, ensuring a comforting transition from a familiar space to an unfamiliar space, while also allowing autistic spectators to learn and engage with theatre beyond the performance event. These visual stories help to explain alterations to the space and performance, any potentially triggering moments, and help children and their families navigate the space at The Unicorn so as to ensure that they have the best possible experience at the theatre. The use of visual stories, a visual synopsis used to help autistic individuals prepare for their

visit to the theatre, helps to instil a sense of sameness and familiarity while also allowing them to engage with the production and the theatre before and after their visit. As the visual story tells the reader on the first page 'This visual resource is for children and young adults visiting the Unicorn Theatre to see a performance of *Philip Pullman's Grimm Tales.* This visual story is intended to help you to become familiar with the surroundings and the performance.'[110] Visual stories are an important digital resource in helping autistic spectators, their families and their carers best prepare, accommodate, and feel comfortable with both the space, and being aware ahead of time of what happens within the performance. This is distinctly different from the lack of audience engagement at The Southwark Playhouse, and highlights how important it is for quirky spaces to engage with autistic spectators. Thus, visual stories provide an opportunity through the digital sphere to renegotiate the exterior and interior elements of the theatre space. Through the digital sphere of the visual story, autistic spectators and their families at The Unicorn can engage with the relaxed performance both before, during and after the performance event, allowing for us to think about the visual story as a document that helps facilitate spatial engagement both within the domestic sphere and the theatre building. Visual stories like those used at The Unicorn constitute as part of quirky dramaturgy because they seek not only to reason and explain access changes and assist autistic theatregoers, but because they are also socially engaged documents that seek to realign the temporal relationship which the spectator has to the exteriority and interiority of the theatrical space. The visual story also informs the reader of alterations and accommodations in the performance and any leftover technical elements from the alteration to relaxed performance so as to ensure that both child and adult are aware. The visual story breaks down the forms of access provided, explaining that:

> We have made the usual amendments to the volume and lighting levels in the auditorium but due to the nature of the show you will experience moments of startling lighting, costume changes

[110] *Philip Pullman's Grimm Tales Visual Story* (London: Unicorn Theatre, 2019) p.1

> and prop use with loud sound effects. Sometimes the voices on stage get louder when they are pretending to be angry or upset. You might hear them echo around you. These are just recorded voices.[111]

The clear communication of amendments is good, allowing parents and children to prepare and feel assured. This can also allow parents to potentially see how appropriate the relaxed performance is for the needs of their child, providing flexibility in the ways in which a family might wish to engage with the performance.

The Unicorn also understood that spatial alterations go beyond technical alterations within the theatre auditorium. This dichotomy and clear access dissonance between *All in a Row* and *Grimm Tales* underpins the core differences between making minor access changes for an audience within the auditorium and ensuring that the entire space of the theatre is adapted and caters for autistic audiences. In these moments, what defines the spaces at The Unicorn as quirky and The Southwark as not is the clear aesthetic choices that made the space at The Unicorn cater to their audience, namely autistic children and their parents. Lighting changes within the auditorium, a chill out space complete with toys to stimulate the children, visual stories to inform and educate children and their families about the production and the theatre space itself, these elements all inform the way that The Unicorn uses its relaxed spaces to engage with autistic children and their families.

However, despite inclusive practices that define the space as quirky, it is also clear that The Unicorn was not fully inclusive as certain production elements such as the strobe lighting did not fit the needs of autistic audiences. The use of strobe lighting within *Grimm Tales* creates a glaring access issue, and it is situated as a somewhat disruptive element in the quirky dramaturgical practice of *Grimm Tales*. This is a rather stand-out access failure and potential sensory trigger to the many autistic children within the auditorium. The visual story does allude to this element and the theatre was littered with warnings about the relaxed performance having strobe effects which, although

[111] Ibid., p.2

appreciated, does not justify the inclusion of the strobe lighting within the relaxed performance, as it creates a clear access barrier. Moments such as this underscore the educational and training issues that still exist within relaxed performance.

2.6: Access Disregard

Although *Grimm Tales* does actively engage with the access changes of quirky dramaturgy in regards to the technical alterations, there was a disregard for the temporal elements that may cause discomfort during a performance that has a long duration. In the case of *All in a Row*, most access changes were ignored beyond the most basic of lighting changes. What these failings underline is the need to better educate and inform theatre practitioners with some form of codified language to help ensure consistent, accessible, and comfortable audience experiences within these spaces. This starts first and foremost by allowing autistic spectators agency in engaging with work in their own way and giving them the flexibility to opt out if they find the work or the environment around them too stressful. This is not to say that all spaces an autistic theatregoer engages with should be overstimulating, but with quirky dramaturgy creating accessible theatre spaces, autistic audiences have agency both in how they choose to spectate, and whether they wish to spectate the work at all. Providing such spaces is imperative so that we might understand that not all autistic spectators are the same, and that sometimes duration or general boredom will create hyper or hypo sensitive situations for them.

We might also see further disregard in the manifesto of former Unicorn artistic director Purni Morell, published in *The Stage* in 2016, which underpins at once both the ways in which The Unicorn under her tenure sought to open up the arts to children, while falling into unconscious assumptions about their neurology. Although having resigned in spring of 2018, her successor Justin Audibert's programme for The Unicorn did not begin until May 2019. This makes *Grimm Tales* one of the last shows of the Morell era of The Unicorn. Within her manifesto for children's theatre, Morell lays out 5 key points that underpin her vision. Firstly, she would 'like us to stop treating theatre for

children as provision and start treating it as art.'[112] Secondly, she would 'like us to stop using the phrases TYA (theatre for young audiences) and CYP (children and young people)'[113]. Thirdly she would 'like a moratorium on the use of the words 'charming', 'enchanting' and 'magical' in marketing and copy reviews'.[114] Penultimately she would 'like adults to be required to leave all phones, bags, food and other distractions in the cloakroom in order to make room for properly and exclusively watching the play alongside their young companions'[115]. Finally, Morell would like 'to see an end to all-white casts across the board.'[116] I would like to focus in on two very specific points which her manifesto proposes, in particular her first and penultimate points.

Responding to Morell's first point within her manifesto, I would like to emphasise the importance of seeking to make children's theatre more about art than provision. Regarding children and young adults, this creates a platform for debate, discussion and self-expression. Thus, to seek this shift is doubly important for children's and relaxed performance. Indeed, if we look at the September to December 2018 programming of The Unicorn (the same timeframe as *Grimm Tales*) we see a diverse range of performances and works ranging from spoken word poetry (*Mouth Open*, *Story Jump Out*), ongoing performances for babies (*Baby Show*), more fringe and experimental work (*Truth or Dare*, *Britney and Goofy*, *Nacht und Nebel*, *Jesus Christ or Superstar*) and dance (*On the Road*).[117] We can see a wide range of works within the programming of The Unicorn which certainly emphasises a focus on a more diverse, engaging selection of performances for children. This in turn emphasises a more diverse range of works within relaxed performance for the time being, however, it also emphasises a glaring issue as well in the way relaxed performance is marketed, programmed, and ultimately functions as of present. As Fletcher-Watson summarises, 'There is therefore currently a lack of provision for adults with autism and others who may wish to enjoy traditional drama but

[112] Purni Morell, 'My Manifesto To Enhance Children's Theatre Experience', *The Stage, Opinion*, p.10 (July 28, 2016).
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.p11
[117] *Unicorn 2018/19 Season Brochure,*(London: Unicorn Theatre, 2018) p.4-7.

require a degree of accommodation in order to visit the theatre.'[118] Fletcher-Watson continues by suggesting that 'The desires of autistic theatregoers, especially adults, may therefore demand greater representation.'[119]

I will therefore draw upon Morell's penultimate point within her manifesto. This manifesto point places The Unicorn in a strange ethical space of seeking to create an inclusive environment, more so with its extensive programming of relaxed performances for their productions, while also propagating assumptive ideas of cognition within theatre spaces. It appears to draw on assumptions of how to behave, even if Morell's intentions are ultimately intended to be good natured. Morell claims that:

> When we are at the theatre, we're all relevant to the experience, and, given we regularly require children to pay attention to what adults say for 40 minutes at a time, six times a day, five days a week in class, I think we can reasonably require adults to pay silent and complete attention to what children are listening to for 50 minutes in a theatre once a week or month, without interfering, offering beverages, shushing or asking whether everything is okay or whether they understand. [120]

Morell makes a broad claim about how parents should behave, but seems to zone in on somewhat banal vocal points. Is drinking or asking a child if they want a drink disruptive to their spectatorship experience in the same way that loud and disruptive audience members would be if we follow the line of reasoning employed within our theatre spaces? And do these ways of behaving tide over into how a parent should behave during a relaxed performance? If we resign ourselves to the fact that children's theatre and relaxed performance seem somewhat interlocked culturally within British theatre, then these claims must also find a place in the relaxed performances The Unicorn regularly puts on and champions. In those instances, we might say Morell is making two dangerous claims.

[118] Fletcher-Watson, pp.61-89 (p.68).
[119] Ibid., p.75.
[120] Morell, pp.10-11

One is in the assumption that the adults might be neurotypical. Or are we to be so presumptuous as to assume an autistic parent might not wish to take their child to the theatre, in the same way as any neurotypical parent would? Morell has fallen into a series of problematic assumptions about neurological functionality. The second is the assumption that a parent should not interfere in the spectatorship of the child, to be the disruptive agent in the logic of the space. I speak here within the context of relaxed performance, and the issues of assuming each parent and each child are somewhat stable manifestations of the experience of every parent and every child. In these assumptions we also might understand the ways in which The Unicorn might engage with spaces that have been made accessible for autistic theatregoers. In relaxed performance, each autistic spectator will have their own sets of potential needs, varying from none to very little in terms of care, to some autistic spectators that will indeed need significant care within the theatre from their parents or carers. This is not to demean the way an autistic spectator might engage with performance, but rather to indicate that, for some, having a parent or carer is an important part of helping them to navigate the neurotypical world. As a result, spaces are elastic to the needs of those they provide access for. In the way that access at The Unicorn is provided, with reference to the strobe lighting and the bringing of your own ear defenders, it is important to point out that the relaxed space of The Unicorn itself had access requirements for autistic audiences within its own inclusive spatial logics. While it was clear that the relaxed performance at The Unicorn engaged with quirky dramaturgical practices, the execution of those practices by The Unicorn created access barriers, which meant that it was not inclusive to some autistic children. Quirky dramaturgy, if engaged with correctly, creates access for autistic individuals, and must understand those spaces to be sites of safety and self-expression.

2.7: Quirky Aims of Relaxed Performance

This sentiment of safety and self-expression is shared by Andy Kempe, who sees as core to the aims of relaxed performance the development of social skills of autistic children. What underscores this

social development for Kempe is the relational response between autism and theatre etiquette, and the resulting dissonance it produces between spatial logics of a standard theatre space and a relaxed theatre space. Kempe argues that:

> A child with autism may initially be very aware of herself, but not necessarily so aware of other audience members until her behaviour causes them disturbance and they react negatively. The possible result of this can be catastrophic, in that what the child might learn is that, confusingly her engagement with the performance leads to her experiencing the negative feelings of others. The idea she gains from this is that theatre can feel hurtful and cause others to be aggressive.[121]

Kempe views theatre etiquette as impacting the development of social skills in autistic children. It stands to reason that relaxed performances therefore have a great value to children's theatre in helping autistic children both engage with the arts from a young age and begin to practice and develop their social skills in environments that are not hostile to their way of engaging with the world. Quirky dramaturgy within the context of children's theatre allows for a more expressive, autistic experience of performance that does not make reducible their experiences within the theatre. And despite the ethical issues one might raise towards The Unicorn, access and engagement created a non-hostile environment. The visual story in particular presents a chance for autistic children to engage with the interiority and exteriority of The Unicorn both in terms of social and artistic engagement. Furthermore, the auditorium access for the most part, alongside the engagement of the actors upon the stage with the autistic audience sitting within the auditorium, situated a space as non-threatening and welcoming of their cognitive and kinaesthetic relationship to the performance and the space, even if this meant accepting their fidgeting and frustration at the duration of the second act.

[121] Andy Kempe, 'Developing Social Skills in Autistic Children Through 'Relaxed Performances', *Support for Learning*, Vol.29, (September, 2014) pp.261-274 (p.265).

Kempe develops this relationship between relaxed spaces and the quirky, viewing that the primary goal of relaxed performance 'is to make the strange surrounding and event feel familiar, in order that the child might re-cognise not just the fiction enacted upon the stage, but the whole experience.'[122] Kempe argues that in trying to make familiar the fiction of the theatre space, we might transpose outwards into the auditorium manifestations of autistic lived experiences that intersect with the fictional world of the performance. The use of visual stories is an excellent example of just this within the access practices of relaxed performance. The intersection of the real and the fantastical come together, allowing autistic audiences the chance to acquaint themselves with the action of the performance and the logistics of the theatre before their physical visit, ensuring a more comfortable transition from a familiar setting to a more unfamiliar environment. Visual stories not only detail the plot of the performance and the actors, but also props and any potentially uncomfortable moments in the performance, allowing time to process and understand the mechanics of the show before engaging with the fictional world at the performance event. Freud, speaking of the uncanny as depicted within the arts, proposes that, 'Above all, it is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life.'[123] The theatre auditorium becomes the intersection where fiction and reality meet. In better allowing autistic spectators to engage with and understand the dynamics at play within the theatre auditorium and the distinction between the real and fantastical, relaxed performance serves to help process and understand those experiences in a space that is quirky, and to cognitively process the performance in a way that is both comfortable and familiar.

Kempe builds on the idea of relaxed performance as sites of experiential understanding by proposing that 'the RP can represent an opportunity to signal the presence and nature of autism to

[122] Ibid., p.266.
[123] Sigmund Freud, trans. James Starchey, 'The 'Uncanny' ', *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955) p.249.

the wider community. By fostering greater understanding and acceptance, some of the tensions that can spark alarming behaviour may be alleviated.'[124] Kempe proposes that shared learning comes from neurotypical and neurodivergent engagements, and in doing so theatre etiquette in non-relaxed settings might shift to becoming more inclusive towards autistic individuals and their way of engaging. Nicola Shaughnessy also finds an importance in these same sorts of engagements, arguing that:

> the embodied, intermedial and live qualities of contemporary performance […] create an opening into the autistic child's world. It is through this door that we may enter their world and they may vicariously enter ours.[125]

Performance for Shaughnessy is a way of constructing spaces wherein neurotypical people may be allowed a way into the world and perspectives of autistic individuals. It is through an ongoing dialogue that true strides in accessibility and inclusion are made possible. This sentiment is also shared by artist and relaxed performance campaigner Jess Thom. Thom believes these sites of neurological cultural exchange can bring 'relaxed performances to more people, building and sustaining links with new audiences, and developing confidence about access issues amongst theatre companies.'[126] Beyond this, actively encouraging and fostering an integration of neurotypical and neurodivergent spectators, engaging and discussing issues both on a ground level with spectators, but also with institutions and the cultural industry as a whole within the UK, begins to break down the access barriers that currently exist . What we are left with then is a more holistic means of engaging with performance on a behavioural level, but also on a sensory level. Thom situates relaxed performance as educational and important to forming new communities and breaking down misconceptions around disability and neurodivergence. Relaxed performance's ability to situate

[124] Kempe, pp.261-274 (p.272).
[125] Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.249.
[126] Jess Thom, 'Relaxed VS. Extra Live', www.tourretteshero.com, https://www.touretteshero.com/2015/02/21/'relaxed'-vs-'extra-live'/ (21st Feb, 2015) [Accessed 12/02/2019].

itself outside of mainstream theatre etiquette means that new ways of engaging with performance as spectators might manifest. To this extent, the role of relaxedness within quirky dramaturgy stems from the relationship between the autistic theatregoer and their environment. Through making that relationship manifest and thinking about the ways in which relaxedness breaks down access barriers, we ensure safe inclusive spaces wherein spectators might express themselves without fear of being deemed disruptive.

2.8: Quirky Dramaturgy within Relaxed Performance Policy

The spaces at The Southwark Playhouse *and* The Unicorn present two very different types of space, each working with or against quirky dramaturgy in their own manners. That is to say both are generated under different spatial and ideological paradigms that seek to create access in their own ways. The resultant access successes and failures of both productions establish an unstable, hard to define aspect to relaxed policy making. Although we might see such varying degrees of access as an extension of quirky dramaturgy, the more reasonable explanation is a distinct lack of clear policy making strategies. That is not to systematise relaxed performances, to do so would be inherently against a quirky dramaturgical practice and its commitment to flexibility, and would simply aim to restrict autistic audiences by having a narrow, nationwide, relaxed access framework. Rather, theatres should have clearer, more defined policy making beyond a page on a website. Thom echoes this sentiment, writing that 'While it's important that the key principles of relaxed performances are consistent across venues, we would encourage theatres to develop their own house-style for delivering them. A theatre's character and ethos is expressed through its programming and branding, and its approach to relaxed performance should be consistent with this ethos too.'[127] Thom situates access policy as being reflective of arts practice. Access is more than a means of creating inclusive space. It is also a conscious artistic choice that is reflective of the theatre. Take for

[127] Jess Thom, 'Relaxed Performances – The FAQS', www.tourretteshero.com, https://www.touretteshero.com/2016/03/16/relaxed-performances-the-faqs/ (16th March, 2016) [Accessed 10/12/19].

instance the Unicorn, who ensures that each production has two relaxed performances. Comparatively, the Southwark Playhouse only had a single relaxed performance for the entirety of its production about autism. Comparing the degree of inclusiveness each theatre space offered, from the haphazard access of *All in a Row* to the more inherently quirky if not perfect access of *Grimm Tales*. Both relaxed performances at the theatres highlight their level of training and access , as well as the ways in which the site of these theatres spatially engage with autistic theatregoers. There appears to be a distinct disconnect in the volume and enthusiasm some theatres have in creating relaxed spaces for autistic audiences for their productions. And while the level and volume of access provided by the Unicorn is certainly fantastic in terms of providing accessible theatre spaces for young autistic audiences to engage with, adult audiences find themselves with very few relaxed spaces. The potential opportunities of relaxed performances and quirky dramaturgy become restrictive if relaxed performance continues to be seen as a piece of arts access policy only relevant within the contexts of children's theatre and pantomime. Quirkiness can be a powerful tool of advocacy, but quirky dramaturgy within theatres is not provided consistently enough outside of their perceived demographic, and as such arts access policy is not a solidified, tangible thing, but rather an abstract notion many theatres use on a whim when it might thematically suit a production. These spaces are tokenistic and against the core tenents of quirky dramaturgy. Autistic advocacy within these more mainstream theatre spaces is often beholden to theatres choosing whether or not to put on a relaxed performance of a production. This raises issues on the sorts of spaces being offered, and who has access to them.

All in a Row's relaxed performance underscores these tensions at play within relaxed spaces in terms of form and content. The disconnect between theatres and audiences situates relaxed performance as a tentative form of access at present in as much as the form of access offered is limited in terms of content. That situates these quirky spaces as narrow in scope to children's theatre and thematically linked productions. When such thematically linked shows such as *All in a Row* create relaxed performances for their productions then, what comes into tension is the ways in

which autism is presented on stage and how access is provided within the auditorium. If these theatres wish to engage with autistic audiences and have relaxed performance become situated as a safe space for autistic audiences, why are there so few relaxed performances for adult autistic theatregoers?

Jess Thom breaks down the reasons by underscoring the lack of relaxed performances offered by the ten largest performance venues in London during the year of 2019, presenting her own independent findings outside of her work on the 2019 'State of Theatre Access Report'.

1.**Old Vic** – One relaxed performance – Jan 2020 *(+1 from 2018)*

2. **Young Vic** – No relaxed performances *(No change since 2018)*

3. **National Theatre** – One relaxed performance – Aug 2019 *(+1 from 2018)*

4. **Royal Court** – Ten relaxed performances between July 2019 – Feb 2020 *(+8 from 2018)*

5. **Barbican Centre** – No relaxed performances *(-1 from 2018)*

6. **Soho Theatre** – No relaxed performances *(No change since 2018)*

7. **Royal Opera House** – One relaxed performance – Jan 2020 *(+1 from 2018)*

8. **Lyric Hammersmith** – One relaxed performance *(No change since 2018)*

9. **Southbank Centre** – No relaxed performances *(No change since 2018)*

10. **Sadler's Wells** – Two relaxed performances – December 2019 *(+2 from 2018)*[128]

What this lack of relaxed performances underscores within theatre in the capital is a clear failure to create relaxed theatre spaces outside of children's theatre and pantomime. Thom highlights these criticisms of the inaction of the largest arts institutions in the UK, writing that;

> Eight out of these ten institutions are Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs). In just one year (2019-20) they will receive £65.5 million in public money. Between them

[128] Thom, 'Relaxed Performances: The Sector has to do better', 'Feature', *Arts Professional* https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/328/feature/relaxed-performances-why-sector-has-do-better (10th October, 2019)[Accessed 1/11/2019].

> all, the eight NPOs are holding just four relaxed performances, all of which are children's shows. This means that for me and for many other would-be theatregoers who need relaxed performances, these institutions have nothing.[129]

Thom showcases a distinct lack of genre diversification from the data she has produced. Some theatres as of 2022 do offer at least a single relaxed performance for some of their productions, as is the case with the National Theatre, but this is not the case for every show programmed at the National Theatre, and the attempts of access still seem to be presented more as tokenistic. Sporadic or inconsistent singular relaxed shows do not equate to an effective access policy. Issues of autistic spectatorship are interlinked to the willingness of theatre institutions to engage with autistic audiences in constructive and meaningful ways. If smaller London theatres such as The Southwark can create such a distinct failure in its attempts to create work about autism, it raises issues about the wider cultural climate of the UK when trying to engage with neurodivergent and disabled people. And even children's theatre venues like the Unicorn and their prominent position as one of the progenitors of relaxed performance within London, offers access that is still tied to children's theatre. It is not the job of a children's theatre to try to extend outward relaxed work for adult audiences, indeed the responsibility should be on other theatres to make inclusive sites of performance for autistic audiences. The fact that the relaxed performances these theatres are putting into their programming are aimed towards children, highlights the lack of relaxed performances for adult autistic audiences that find standard performance spaces inaccessible to their needs. In these cases, there are few spaces that truly abide by quirky dramaturgy or strive to create spaces that emphasise autistic self-advocacy. Quirky dramaturgy is important in allowing theatres a means to think about practices to create experiences for autistic people tailored towards their specific needs and help them reflect upon the ways in which access can be improved upon. In creating quirky dramaturgy, there is a means for institutions to more readily engage with theatre

[129] Ibid.

access and support in ways that they might not have thought about before, as we strive to open the theatre to those who might not have had regular access to it previously.

Quirky dramaturgy is not some specialist niche either, as it pushes autistic modes of making and spectating performance to the cultural periphery. Quirky dramaturgy emphasises the importance of art in the lives of autistic and disabled people, and stresses why expanding and ensuring access and support for those groups within the theatre is so important. As Thom explains:

> 22% of the UK population identify as disabled, and while of course not all these 14 million people will have relaxed performance as an access requirement, a good proportion will. In fact, if you add up the number of people living in the UK with five of the impairments that might make relaxed shows helpful, you get to in excess of 8 million people. [130]

Thom lays out a bleak future for arts access if the current trajectory of programmed relaxed performances in these large arts institutions continues. 'If the rate of change continues at this pace, it will take until 2028 to get 100 shows a year – that's almost a decade away, and 100 shows a year is still only around 3% of all the performances at these ten venues.'[131] Relaxed performance policy making within the UK at present then is disproportionate to those who would benefit from such access. It becomes difficult then to at present to agree with Thom's argument for allowing theatres to create their own access policy, because at present it is apparent that there is no active or conscious effort to expand relaxed performance outside of a perceived niche.

Despite the utopian ideal that relaxed performances in the UK hold onto, there are several tensions in the access it provides. Access seems to take many forms at The Southwark Playhouse and The Unicorn, and under such circumstances, there are clear issues that arise from the ways in which The Southwark Playhouse and The Unicorn creates spaces that are relaxed flexible and neuroqueer, while also abiding aesthetically to the quirky. These differences or issues such as problematic lighting

[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.

choices, lack of consideration for the whole theatre space or no visual stories, disrupt quirky dramaturgical practices and detract from a socially engaged and inclusive theatre that advocates for spaces that put autistic audiences to the forefront. Likewise, we have seen quirky dramaturgy use spatial elements that are directly responding to inclusive arts practice, and seek to create socially engaged spaces for autistic audiences to enjoy theatre within. Quirky dramaturgy in these contexts gives us a means to understand its relationship to relaxed performance. It also allows us to see how relaxed performance policy intersects with or resists quirky dramaturgy, thereby giving a framework to examine the ways in which such spaces are constructed and implemented within UK theatres. This therefore helps us to understand the potential of quirky dramaturgy to move access outside of being exclusively made for children's theatre and pantomime, where the majority of autistic arts access takes place. Access was minimal and non-existent at *All in a Row* beyond house lighting being left on, and although this proved less of an issue under the contexts of a community coming together in the face of an ableist production, these access issues would have been made more glaring had the play had more than one programmed relaxed performance of this production.

It is clear that relaxed performances like those at The Southwark Playhouse and The Unicorn situate the theatre as a space that people can express their autism within, free of the judgement that they might otherwise face in a more mainstream traditional theatrical setting. In doing so, quirky dramaturgy also opens up the opportunity for autistic audiences to engage with and experience performance in a way that emphasises self-advocacy and spectator expressiveness. By striving towards an idea of flexibility, we can neuroqueer not only the politics of space and who has the right to access those spaces, but also begin to think of the ways in which we might better renegotiate the role of the spectator within the performance event. Quirky dramaturgy certainly offers the potentiality to create accessible theatre spaces for autistic audiences, offering them the chance to engage with theatre and performance and find new ways of interacting with art and each other both within and outside the theatre. Yet despite this, relaxed performance finds itself fraught with several issues that often makes us return to the disturbing image of the autistic puppet used in

All in a Row. The puppet of Laurence underscores the at times tense relationship between space and autistic audiences, both in terms of the level of access given when they do choose to provide a relaxed performance, and the hostile environment standard theatre spaces can be for a number of autistic theatregoers. And beyond these issues, the puppet comes to distil the objectification and infantilization of autism and quirkiness, that often leads to relaxed performances being programmed almost exclusively within the realms of children's theatre, thus restricting the variety of theatre that can be seen by adult autistic audiences. This brings into question how effective the practical implementation of its access is, and thus leaves us to scrutinise what needs to be done to allow for spaces within relaxed performance to fully engage with quirky dramaturgical practices.

For Fletcher-Watson, 'Several notable features of autism are not yet currently accommodated by RP practice. In particular, the size of the crowd at larger venues may be off-putting to a significant proportion of autistic audiences.'[132] Mainstream relaxed performances fail to give adequate consideration to a number of autistic traits, more so in relation to social aspects and the relationship space. As I have written about in this chapter, the aesthetics which theatres might provide within their attempts to make spaces accessible impact the autistic spectators that they are trying to be inclusive for. This proves to make these spaces fail in their core aim of providing access to autistic audiences while offering a relaxed, non-judgemental space to enjoy theatre within. Having relaxed performances framed around children's theatre or productions with some link to autism, severely limits the scope of audiences and the scope of work, and still makes it so that theatre access in mainstream theatre spaces restricts autistic theatregoers, because there is neither the variety nor the volume of relaxed performances being offered by theatres. What becomes apparent between the Southwark Playhouse and The Unicorn, is a failure to understand accessible spaces for autistic audiences, in the case of The Southwark Playhouse, or an imperfect but sincere conscious effort to engage with autistic audience and quirky aesthetics, in the case of The Unicorn.

[132] Fletcher-Watson, pp.61–89 (p.79).

The fact that children's theatre and relaxed performance are tied together limits the level of access that can be given to autistic adults that wish to visit the theatre. Relaxed performance is difficult to maintain or produce for autistic audiences because access is rooted in the inability for theatres to create access that allows autistic audiences a chance to see performance. This leads to dangerous levels of privilege in terms of then having to ask what sort of spaces are autistic friendly. If those who might more easily pass as neurotypical can find comfort in non-relaxed spaces, and children have relaxed spaces available to them, those who do not make use of either of these forms of relaxed access are left with little support. By using quirky dramaturgy alongside access policy and implementing ideas through this practice, it will allow for us to create spaces wherein autistic audiences might freely express themselves in spaces that celebrate and embrace autism. Quirky dramaturgy brings autistic people together to create communities, with the aims of self-advocacy and self-expression. For relaxed performance to grow, theatres must first take responsibility for the role they play in the way we engage and consume art and culture. And while many might move away in rebellion from this inactivity on the part of large theatre institutions to act on a more widespread level, such smaller relaxed performance spaces do not fix the fact for many autistic spectators, theatre spaces do not effectively deal with their needs. And advocating for safe spaces like those offered can help raise issues about broader access issues within the arts, and how the theories and practices of quirky dramaturgy are best suited to help. It is my personal recommendation that UK theatres need to more effectively create access making policies with autistic communities to understand the sorts of access needed and wanted, and what spatial aesthetic they should take shape in. Theatres need to follow a model more in the framework of The Unicorn, with clear accessible information on access, with at least two relaxed performances per production.

To this extent, quirky dramaturgical practices neuroqueer a space by presenting performances that can disrupt the neuronormative rhetoric of that space. This results in creating spaces that welcome those who otherwise feel excluded from theatre spaces. As the neurodiversity movement continues to grow, and as training for those working in theatres begins to improve, we

might yet see a change towards a more robust form of inclusivity that does not inhabit almost solely children's theatre at the present time. Hannah Simpson sees that:

> By embracing the relaxed performance, contemporary theatre has the potential both to improve access opportunities and re-establish and indeed enhance the theatrical medium's power to generate productive communion amongst spectators, thus breeding positive social change beyond, as well as within, the walls of the auditorium.[133]

Simpson emphasises that by allowing relaxed performance to be embraced more readily within theatre, that we can begin to renegotiate access for autistic audiences not just within theatre spaces, but outside them as well. For Simpson, relaxed performance is a wider blueprint for the ways in which ableism in Britain might be more readily challenged and disrupted in not just the theatre, but public spaces too. In rethinking how we might allow access to a group of people who would otherwise find the logics of that space confusing or scary, this is an important step towards advocating for more autism friendly spaces outside of the theatre as well as within them.

It is clear then to see why we see performance as such an important tool for autistic self-expression, both as performer and spectator, imagining new ways of being and engaging with works that exist outside of the neurotypical framework of spectating and engaging. For Nicola Shaughnessy:

> This exploration of the sensory experiences and perceptual worlds of autism through contemporary performance helps us to understand that the relations between a neurotypical and neurodivergent consciousness are part of a continuum, whereby the notion of an autistic spectrum is no longer defined by any sharp separation from 'normality'.[134]

[133] Hannah Simpson, 'Tics in The Theatre: The Quiet Audience, The Relaxed Performance, and The Neurodivergent Spectator', *Theatre Topics*, Vol.28, (November, 2018) pp.227-238, (p.234).
[134] Nicola Shaughnessy 'Imagining Otherwise: Autism, Neuroaesthetics and Contemporary Performance', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, Vol.38 (December, 2013) pp321-334 (p.332).

These displays of audience performativity within quirky spaces, alongside more broader sensory responses to performances for autistic spectators, mean inclusive spaces can provide the chance to see the more broad phenomenological responses which each audience member might have to an individual piece of performance, emphasising not only the audience as a group of individuals, but also the wide ranging ways in which we engage with art and the world around us, showcasing that we are all part of a wider neurological spectrum that makes notions of normal somewhat redundant.

Relaxed performances when actively engaging with quirky dramaturgy can create spaces of communal coming together that emulates the importance of self-advocacy for autistic people, as well as the self-advocacy of other neurodivergent and disabled individuals. Theatres must be more proactive in their attempts to create access, and bring relaxed spaces and quirky dramaturgy to many more autistic theatregoers. To this extent, it becomes clear that theatres must be more communicative in the ways that they market such performances. Thom breaks down this means of marketing relaxed performances, arguing that:

> In many ways relaxed performances should be marketed in the same way as any other. They should feature with equal prominence on the venue's website, and clearly identified as relaxed. It's often useful to offer a brief description of what this means, positively framing the potential benefits to all audience members.[135]

The information provided for instance on the Unicorn website, includes pages on access which clearly detail all-inclusive performances on the page for each production, something not present on the website of The Southwark Playhouse. Between the two theatres there is a distinct difference in engagement in how the theatres seek to inform audiences about their relaxed spaces. In the case of The Unicorn, it is clear that the layout and communication of its access has allowed for it to articulate and market its relaxed performances to those who are familiar with The Unicorn. There

[135] Thom, Relaxed Performances – The FAQS'.

again can be seen to a be a clear quirky element of the ways in which the theatre seeks to communicate and market to audiences more accessible theatre spaces for autistic children.

One might argue that the spatial elements within this context are less access and more a service being sold, but Thom situates the marketing of relaxed performances as going beyond the selling and marketing of tickets for productions within these spaces. For Thom, 'Targeted outreach will help broaden your audience.'[136] Thom situates expanding knowledge of relaxed spaces as coming from the ways in which theatres engage with the autistic theatregoers that they are seeking to create access for. This sentiment is shared by Fletcher-Watson, who writes that 'Consultation with theatregoers extends beyond the decision to attend an event, and must be negotiated constantly and with care throughout any encounter with the arts.'[137] Fletcher-Watson sees the engagement of theatres offering relaxed performance with autistic audiences extending beyond the physical visit to the theatre and engagement with space and performance. This means as we shall discuss in Chapter 5, creating community and giving autistic people agency over the ways in which they engage with access is paramount in making robust and effective access policies. Access choices should be made with involvement of autistic theatregoers and should not be entirely beholden to the theatre institution. For the growth of relaxed performance to continue, and for it to extend, market and programme itself outside of children's theatre, theatres must engage with audiences in such a way that access of space is an ongoing negotiable process as opposed to theatre spaces imposing perceived ideas of what they think formulates 'good' access. As such, it is important for these relaxed spaces to more readily engage with quirky practices by adopting a peer reviewed system to review and gain feedback on access provided within the theatre over the course of a year. This in turn makes relaxed performances and the access that they create both quirky and more diverse with regards to programming. By understanding the relationship that space and audience have in informing the shape of quirky dramaturgies such as relaxed performance, theatres allow autistic

[136] Ibid.
[137] Fletcher-Watson, pp.61–89. (p.75).

theatregoers the chance to feedback the successes and failings of those spaces, how they might alter, and what sorts of performances might be placed within them. This allows quirky dramaturgies to be flexible and put at the forefront of these spaces autistic people as active agents in the ways in which we might imagine quirky dramaturgy, neuroqueering the spatial logics of the theatre and giving autistic people a voice.

Quirky dramaturgy should operate to create spaces of relaxed, flexible neuroqueer spaces that allows audiences the opportunities to best respond to the theatrical event in a way that they feel is comfortable. But even then, there are some issues surrounding the forms of relaxation that might seek to create access for autistic theatregoers. The duration of *Grimm Tales* for instance, caused great discomfort for several autistic children in the audience. The child next to me preferred to sit and crawl on the floor as opposed to sitting on the understandably quite uncomfortable benches. Groans and murmurs could be heard as the second act developed, and the energy of the auditorium at the end was one of tension. Certainly, in such instances, spectators should be able to have the right to move, make noise and spectate in a way that makes them feel most relaxed and at ease. Despite this, these behaviours from the audience were also as a result of them not being physically comfortable within the auditorium, in a similar vein one might argue to the wooden chair and table at The Southwark Playhouse's chill out zone. Under these conditions, the relaxedness of relaxed theatre appears to cave in on itself. This is an experience that Fletcher-Watson himself encountered when watching a relaxed production of *The Lion King*, writing that; 'As the second half progressed, I noticed an increase in movement and noise from other audience members, perhaps suggesting a dissatisfaction with the length of time spent in the venue.'[138] These mainstream relaxed productions seem to raise the issue of how relaxed they truly are. It seems to imply a certain means of trying to use such sites as a way of better conditioning audiences to 'normative' behaviours. This seems more so true at relaxed shows such as *Grimm Tales* or *The Lion King*, that are produced with

[138] Ibid., p.72

autistic children in mind. And sometimes the access from a technical level can be shoddy and problematic, such as *Grimm Tale's* use of strobe lighting, or the lack of any real attempt of access at all for *All in a Row*. For theatres to assume a certain neurological framework of spectating a show, even in a relaxed setting, can construct atmospheres that can still cause great anxiety and stress. Seeing how access is made at The Unicorn and The Southwark Playhouse, autistic arts access is shown to be counterintuitive within the mainstream relaxed space, wherein audiences still find themselves under or over stimulated as a result of poor comfort from seating, poor technical alterations or oversights, or excessive performance durations without consideration for potential stim breaks and the ways in which an autistic spectator might give their attention to the work. As such the claim that mainstream relaxed performances are actually relaxed is somewhat tentative at best.

2.9: Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the features of quirky dramaturgy operate within the sphere of space, and how it creates accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. There is a tentative relationship between relaxedness and theatre access within UK theatre, as I have shown through the performance analysis of *All in a Row* and *Phillip Pullman's Grimm Tales.* Although access policy and strategies to create relaxed spaces do exist within the UK, the effectiveness in volume and practice is questionable. Despite this, quirky dramaturgy has been shown this chapter that these practices can work alongside access making policies to create spaces that make audiences feel comfortable, providing them with flexibility and agency. *All in a Row* highlights how mismanaged and ill-conceived pieces of access for autistic theatregoers can be both offensive and ineffective, while *Grimm Tales* highlights practice that succeeds in providing accommodations for autistic people, but also fails to consider how other aspects of the performance such as strobe lighting or show length might be seen to be an access issue. Coupled with a lacklustre

growth and flexibility of relaxed shows across the UK, rights to access space can still be a hurdle for autistic people, who are framed as outreach issues or objects of tokenistic fetishization as opposed to people with the desire to access and experience live performance.

By using quirky dramaturgy as a means to create spaces wherein autistic audiences can enjoy and appreciate art, we begin to treat such audiences less as a form of tokenistic outreach, and more as a group of theatregoers with their own outlooks and perceptions of the world. We begin to start to see how relaxed, flexible and neuroqueer quirky dramaturgy can be. Quirky dramaturgy is important in understanding how we might view access as distinct artistic choices that take into consideration how space and spectator relate to one another. In creating sites of performance both accessible and understanding of their audience, quirky space aesthetics can become a home for autistic self-advocacy. Quirky dramaturgy offers artists and audiences alike the chance to make and see work within a space that champions more atypical ways of behaving and seeing the world, thereby championing autistic people who feel that standard theatre spaces exclude them. This means that a focus on relaxedness and ensuring comfort and safety for autistic people can be an effective way for arts access to engage with quirky dramaturgy, as it allows a flexible approach to care. Despite some access issues present at The Unicorn, we see a clear and conscious effort from the theatre to engage autistic audiences with their space. We gain a sense of the quirky dramaturgical features being used at The Unicorn, the ways in which the visual story reconfigures interior and exterior dynamics of the theatre space for autistic people, and the ways in which access extended beyond the auditorium within the setting of the theatre. Quirky dramaturgy offers sites wherein autistic audiences can enjoy theatre in spaces that engage with their access needs. By giving autistic audiences agency, by promoting the importance of autistic self-expression and advocacy, quirky dramaturgy can be a means whereby autistic audiences can better engage and experience theatre in spaces that encourage and celebrate their autism. As a result, quirky dramaturgy might begin to move beyond being simply a theatrical movement and be a publicly and politically engaged

movement seeking to create access in public spaces, generating communal spaces of learning and self-expression.

Chapter 3: Theatre Etiquette and the Quirky Audience

Having in the previous chapter dissected the ways in which quirky spaces open up access to autistic theatregoers, it is now time to shift focus to engage much more closely with autistic audiences, examining how quirky dramaturgy and its features engages with them. This chapter will examine how the features of quirky dramaturgy impact audiences, creating accessible pieces of performance made for autistics that welcomes their presence in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. Just as important as the spaces being made accessible are the autistic audience members themselves and their placement within UK theatregoing culture. Throughout this chapter, I will argue for the ways in which quirky dramaturgies can neuroqueer contemporary theatre etiquette cultures within the UK. Autistic performance artist Vijay Patel's *Sometimes I Leave* at the Ovalhouse in2019 and Oily Cart's *All Wrapped Up at Stratford Circus Arts Centre* in *2020* are two such works that engage with audiences in ways that meld autistic experiences and spectatorial engagement. Patel for instance, describes *Sometimes I leave* as 'an ode to 'othered' brains that have been stigmatised in society and not acknowledged for having their unique abilities.'[139] *Sometimes I Leave* uses the audience as active participants as Patel carries out tasks or acts out experimental autism treatments, all the while breaking up action with question and answer [Q&A] sections, asking spectators to engage with him and his autism. *Sometime I Leave* is an educational exploration of Patel's autistic identity and their placement in the world in opposition to neuronormative medical approaches which they have both experienced and read about. Likewise, Oily Cart's *All Wrapped Up* directly involves audiences as active participants. Oily Cart's *All Wrapped Up*, as their website describes, 'welcomes young children and their families into an inclusive, accessible environment, designed specifically for under-fives including those with a range of additional support needs.'[140] *All Wrapped Up* is a participation-based piece of children's theatre that

[139] Vijay Patel, 'Sometimes I Leave', 'Performance', www.vijaypateltheatre.co.uk, https://www.vijaypateltheatre.co.uk/sometimes-i-leave [Accessed 17/12/19].
[140] Oily Cart, 'All Wrapped Up', 'Shows' , www.oilycart.org.uk, https://oilycart.org.uk/shows/all-wrapped-up/ [Accessed 15/3/20].

transports children and their families to the unwrapped world. The ways in which both Patel and Oily Cart engage with their audiences articulate the ways in which quirky dramaturgical practices can be used to engage with autistic audiences. I will show quirky dramaturgy to be a socially engaged way of spectating performance cognitively as an autistic person.

Thinking about the ways in which an audience might be framed, we might want to consider who artists and theatres make their work for. Katalin Trencsényi asks 'Who do they regard as their audience? Where and how do they meet them? (that is: where does the theatre experience begin, take place and end)?'[141] Quirky dramaturgy frames audiences around the ways in which autistic engagements with art and artists are constructed, creating meeting points between artist, audience and space. Within this chapter we will discuss the ways in which Patel and Oily Cart use their work to engage with their audiences and the performance events they create. The strategies used in *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up* places a distinct emphasis on audience participation and making audiences have agency and subjectivity in the theatregoing experiences of quirky dramaturgical practices. These self-produced works that sit outside of the setting of more mainstream, institutional theatrical spaces, raises the question of how effective is the dialogue between theatre and its audiences. Trencsényi argues this point, writing that, 'What are the channels of communication between organisation and its audience, and how reciprocal are those channels?'[142] I will show the ways in which Patel and Oily Cart's participation with audiences relate to mainstream access policies as seen in Chapter 2. Also, looking onwards to Chapter 4 we will discuss the ways in which the artists themselves go about creating an accessible performance practice that engages with the spatial and interpersonal relationships with audiences. These approaches to spectatorship which both performances use helps us to understand and contextualise the histories of theatre etiquette that have gatekept the wrong sorts of theatre audiences from

[141] Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in The Making: A Users Guide for Theatre Practitioners* (London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2015) p.32
[142] Ibid.

engaging with theatre. The participation-based modes of theatregoing place autistic cognitive and kinaesthetic characteristics as central to the audience experience, and allows a neuroqueering of the neuronormative behavioural structures that many autistic people find confusing.

We shall see how quirky dramaturgical practices emphasise the cognitive and kinaesthetic self-expression of autism within the practice theatregoing. I shall argue that quirky dramaturgy's engagement with autistic audiences is defined by and rooted in modes of spectating that neuroqueer more traditionalist modes of sitting within a theatre auditorium and watching a piece of work, and that by engaging with work as a quirky spectator, one is engaging in a new cognitive audience framework that emphasises autistic self-advocacy. I shall examine the ways in which *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up* situate the audience as a political body, and how their engagement with audiences create quirky dramaturgical practices that pair participatory performance practices with autistic theatregoers. The features of quirky dramaturgy respond to audiences by renegotiating the ways in which autistic theatregoers relate with performance, imagining new ways of engaging with the artist that reimagines atypical audience behaviours as welcomed and celebrated while providing effective access and support for those who find more traditional spectatorship models incompatible with their access needs. I argue that quirky dramaturgy allows autistic audiences to neuroqueer neuronormative modes of behaving. I shall situate the neuroqueer as a means of explaining audience behaviours within quirky dramaturgy and its use by autistic audiences as a form of self-advocacy. The audience engagement used in both *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up* imagine ways in which autistic spectators might readily engage with the performative realities in ways that are both educational and reflective of a new way that audiences and performance makers might engage with one another, and positions the act of being autistic within the theatre space as a political act.

3.1: *Sometimes I Leave* and Cognitive Audience Behaviours

Vijay Patel's *Sometimes I Leave* is a prime example of the ways in which the features of quirky dramaturgy reframe how audiences should behave. The dramaturgical practice of *Sometimes I Leave* results in the neuroqueering of more traditional ways of thinking about audience behaviour and formation. I wish to draw particular focus to the ways in which participation is used by Patel, to create an audience paradigm that situates a distinct relationship between autism and spectatorship within quirky theatrical practices. Patel in an interview with Daniel Oliver for the LADA reading room, says of his show that 'it's about how people with Asperger's try and navigate the world, but also try and display it as well'.[143] Patel's performance explores his own relationship to treatment and medicine, and in conjunction with his Q&A segments in the performance, positions the audience as active agents in rethinking the cognitive discourses around autism. Skipping rope hangs around the performance space, and at the start of the performance, Patel informs us there might be times the show might become too much for him, and he will need to take a break. A decision he develops in his interview with Oliver, saying that, 'Sometimes it gets too much, and I can't talk about autism or Asperger's too much because I've built up an inner anxiety talking about it in front of loads of people, so sometimes I need a break from that'[144]. This anxiety manifests itself in the performing of tasks such as skipping rope, a voice over medicalising his body by describing the characteristics of autism, infantizing Patel as we sit and watch. Twice during Patel's performance, he sets aside three minutes for audience members to ask him questions related to his autism. This is both a reprieve for Patel, but also creates moments where he can directly engage with audience members disconnected from the world of the performance. Patel sits close to the audience, and places a timer underneath his seat in a gesture to start the Q&A sections, then asking audience members to raise their hands with autism related questions for him to respond to. Certainly, there are a variety of questions

[143] Patel, quoted in, Daniel Oliver, 'Vijay Patel in Conversation with Daniel Oliver', *Study Room Guide on Neurodiversity* (19 June, 2018) [Accessed 12/2/2023].
[144] Ibid.

answered candidly about being a queer autistic, autism and dating, autism treatment and autism research. The mishandling of some moments situates the artist not as the all-knowing expert of the performance, but rather as a mediator committed to integrating responses from the audience into the work. A distinctly clear moment for me as participant and audience member occurred when Patel jumbled up, became confused, and did not know how to respond when I asked him about how often he finds himself passing. It is a moment that stands out as a crystallisation of quirky dramaturgy both in terms of the shift in the ways in which in which one might see the performer as the expert of the logics within their own fiction and the ways in which this intersects with autistic cognition in the world outside the performance event. The performer and spectator participate within a discourse that makes available knowledge and cognitive understanding to situate and make visible the autistic and atypical qualities of the autistic spectator. This discourse is underscored further by the fact that this engagement is happening between autistic artist and autistic spectator, emphasising the neuroqueer through an exchange of ideas and perceptions that exist outside of the neuronormative framework most audiences understand. Although Patel was not aware of our shared autistic subjectivity, I wish to use this moment to emphasise the sort of quirky dramaturgical practices audiences and artists might use.

This moment of autistic interaction between artist and audience, and the conflict and questioning of whom the knowledge bearer is within the theatrical space, provides a means of underlining the contrast which other behavioural contexts and norms might have upon the autistic audience. As Damien Milton argues:

> far from owning the means of mental production about one's own culture, the 'autistic individual' becomes the 'product' of the industry, the 'thing' that is 'intervened' with[…]Autism is not just an 'invisible disability' to many in terms of a behavioural definition, the 'autistic voice' is

made 'invisible' within the current culture of how knowledge produced about 'autistic people' often excludes empowered 'autistic advocates' from such processes[145]

Patel's Q&A is an important part of the ways in which the quirky is used as a means to allow autistic people the chance to express their own subjectivity within the performance event. Herein the moment of contact and engagement between myself and Patel makes visible the autistic voice and the production of knowledge within performance contexts. Subjectivity is a means of situating and placing the spectator at the forefront of quirky practices. Audience subjectivity advocates free expression of autistic theatregoers and neuroqueers cultural conditions that situates their behaviours as other.

As audience members to Patel's performance, we ourselves were participants, investigators and witnesses to his own quirky subjective structuring of his relationship to medicine and treatment. Participation allows for audiences to begin to have a more direct input in the performance fiction, giving audiences agency and allowing them a proactive role in questioning either the authority of the performer or the neuronormative structures that seek to lay claim to both autistic narrative and autistic cognition. Daniel Oliver discusses this quality in relation to participatory performance, speaking of the way that awkwardness is situated within participatory performance, he writes of how such work results in 'questioning the capability and authority of the facilitator'[146]. Oliver speaks here more in terms of awkwardness instead of the quirky, which relates to his dyspraxic participatory performance practices, but his observation of using participatory performance as a means of questioning authority is a fruitful avenue to further explore. Although questioning the authority of an autistic performer within these contexts as an audience member might fall into ableist trappings and misconceptions about autistic cognitive function, it can also be seen as a fruitful practice within quirky dramaturgy. To this extent, Oliver doesn't go far enough in his belief of

[145] Damian Milton, 'On the Ontological Status of Autism: The "Double Empathy Problem"' *Disability & Society*, Vol.27 (August, 2012) pp.883-887 (p.885)
[146] Daniel Oliver, 'Dyspraxia', *Awkwoods: Daniel Oliver's Dyspraxic Adventures in Participatory Performance*, ed. Daniel Oliver (London: LADA, 2019) pp.12-24 (p.23)

the ways in which participation might be used as a destabilising factor within performance. If we renegotiate this concept within a quirky dramaturgical practice, then instead what begins to manifest is the questioning of neuronormative epistemological frameworks. Maybe, as with the case with myself and Patel's exchange, we can also interrogate differences in knowledge between autistic people and ask ourselves why that might be the case, and how might we reconcile this within the performance event.

3.2: Autistic brains and quirky theatregoing practices

This moment between autistic audience member and performer, myself and Patel, begins to situate quirky dramaturgy as the positioning of neurodivergent brains, and imagines the practices that help formulate a form of spectatorship that emphasises autistic self-advocacy through the dialogue of audience and artist. This was the intent of Patel for *Sometimes I Leave*, who in an interview with Daniel Oliver says that, 'This show is not generalising Asperger's; it's trying to show that actually one person with Asperger's and this other person with Asperger's wouldn't see that the same way'[147]. For Patel, his show is all about the perspectives and lived experiences autistic people carry with them on a daily basis. The perspectives of each autistic theatregoer will differ depending on lived experiences, as Patel breaks down autistic artists and theatregoers as individuals. We are not a collection of disorders defined by a neuronormative research bias. In short, theatre etiquette and the autistic spectator are intrinsically linked to the ways in which the autistic brain is viewed and constructed within neuronormative scientific contexts. In understanding the autistic brain in relation to audience emotionality, we can begin to understand the ways in which in which traditional modes of spectatorship might not be an effective way of thinking about autistic audiences and why traditional theatregoing practices are often seen as not taking into account autistic audiences. Quirky dramaturgy is a means of thinking of the ways autistic spectators engage with performance cognitively and kinaesthetically. It is therefore important to make sense of empathy and sympathy

[147] 'Vijay Patel in Conversation with Daniel Oliver'.

from the autistic perspective. Uta Frith defines these terms as intentional empathy and instinctive sympathy. Frith writes that 'Instinctive sympathy, accompanied by autonomic responses, is a basic emotional response that just spills out, and is not dependant on the ability to mentalize.'[148] Frith describes instinctive sympathy as a reflexive act, more akin to a muscle twitch as opposed to a conscious emotional response. Comparatively Frith defines intentional empathy as requiring 'an ability to mentalize, and is thus dependent on the instructive orientation to other people's mental states.'[149] Unlike the more reflective acts of instinctive sympathy, intentional empathy is reliant on understanding the emotionality of another individual and responding with an appropriate response, such my exchange with Patel. For some autistic people, this can be a difficulty, and might mean that they might not be able to navigate and respond in such a manner to the mental states of others. This emphasises an issue some researchers see in the mentalizing abilities of autistic people under the theoretical framework of theory of mind. While theory of mind claims autistic people suffer from mindblindness and cannot understand the thoughts of others, the practical examples of work such as *Sometimes I Leave*, places cognitive styles and the languages they express as the central placement of interpersonal engagements for autistic people. For Patel, his own brain and experiences as an autistic person are a means of framing the ways he feels as an autistic person, so that the audience can understand his way of seeing the world. This is imperative for us as autistic people to reshape and reclaim narratives that exclude as from conversations about our own identities and the ways we might want support. As Damian Milton writes:

> far from owning the means of mental production about one's own culture, the 'autistic individual' often becomes the 'product' of the industry, the 'thing' that is 'intervened' with. 'Services' are provided for the carers of 'autistic people', often with little attention given to the needs of the 'autistic person' as they perceive them to be. Autism is not just an 'invisible disability' to many in terms of a behavioural definition; the 'autistic voice 'is made 'invisible'

[148] Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.111.
[149] Ibid., p.112.

> within the current culture of how knowledge is produced about 'autistic people', often excluding empowered 'autistic advocates' from the process.[150]

. This is precisely the crux of Patel's *Sometimes I Leave*, using participation and his own experiences as an autistic person to articulate the navigation of his autism in relation to treatments and medical discourses that would rather seek to erase his ownership over his own identity. Milton continues: 'It is true that autistic people often lack insight about non-AS perceptions and culture, yet it is equally the case that non-AS people lack insight into the minds and culture of "autistic people". '[151] A quirky dramaturgical framework of autistic spectatorship instead applies ways in which autistic cognition might be situated within theatre and performance. Quirky dramaturgy asks us to think about our own subjective experiences as autistics, how we can be made visible and given a voice, and how we can break down stigmas and create a flexible and supportive discourse.

3.3: Autism and Theatre Etiquette

Quirky dramaturgy creates spectating experiences that reject theory of mind's framing of autistic cognition, and instead imagines new manners in which the autistic theatregoer might engage with performance cognitively and kinaesthetically. Patel does this by having audience members engage with him during the action of the performance, taking upon the role of medical professionals or assistants for his tasks, while his Q&A sections become moments of direct dialogue between artist and audience. Other times they are helping him perform pseudo-scientific autism cures, or assist in assisting him as he attempts to jump through larger and larger volumes of skipping rope. Patel neuroqueers normative power dynamics, creating flexibility in the in which ways audiences wish to engage with him. Patel himself embodies his own experiences as an autistic person on stage, and asking us to think about our own personal relationships with neurodivergence and how we engage with ourselves and others. Maybe we too, need moments where we simply need to leave, as Patel

[150] Milton, pp.883-887 (p.885).
[151] Ibid.

does near the end of the performance, a video of himself wearing a potato bag over his face projected on the back of the stage, a voice over playing all the while. In regards to this embodying of autism within his practice, Patel says to Oliver that:

> I start now thinking where the process is because I couldn't let go of change or couldn't let go of things that were particularly embedded in Asperger's, and I was thinking yeah obviously, it was made from that brain, so obviously it is going to look in that way, or be performed in a certain way, I think that sits in my body, whereas everything else on stage can probably sit differently. [152]

Patel here speaks of the ways in which his autism impacts his artistic practice, and work such as *Sometimes I Leave* is an outward manifestation of his own neurology. In laying out his own identity as autistic upon the stage, he constructs a power dynamic between audience and performer that challenges normative understandings of how the relationship between the two should function. Bruce McConachie lays out the power dynamics of this normative framework of audience and performer. For McConachie:

> While people do alternate between the roles of spectator and player in rituals and computer games, most performances do not allow for this alternation. Rather, many performances are structured so that audiences do not physically interrupt the performance.[153]

McConachie situates these more normative spectatorial frameworks as operating upon a hierarchical system wherein audiences and performers have strict roles and functions within the performance event. Patel breaks away from these hierarchical understandings of audience and artist, instead wanting audiences to be active agents in his performance. In making a more democratised framework of spectatorship, he helps to relax audiences and put them at their ease by ensuring that they know that they are not bound by some hierarchal framework of behaviour. This

[152] 'Vijay Patel in Conversation with Daniel Oliver'.
[153] Bruce McConachie, *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) p.99.

extends to Patel himself, as he does not feel the pressure to maintain a persona on stage if he finds himself becoming overstimulated, and instead simply leaves to help calm himself. McConachie points out 'Spectators go to entertainments knowing and desiring strong emotional engagement.'[154] It is indeed true that theatregoers want to see performance in order to feel and be emotionally affected by what is happening upon the stage. But likewise, it is important to see this notion of emotional engagement through the lens of quirky dramaturgy, wherein safety is imperative to encourage autistic audience to emotionally engage with the performance without fear of repercussion. This is because, more traditionalist modes of audience etiquette also limit and fail to comprehend the variety of different ways in which we might cognitively seek to engage with performance. As Chapter 2 already emphasised, traditional theatrical spaces can be inaccessible for many autistic spectators because they might not comprehend how a spatial quality will negatively impact an autistic person. More traditional frameworks of imagining the spectator are often done through neuronormative cognitive readings as opposed to imagining the wider breadth of cognitive and affective emotionality.

These traditional forms of spectatorship can be a daunting or inaccessible prospect for many autistic theatregoers who are viewed as atypical and disruptive elements within traditional affective and behavioural conventions. Perceived atypical behaviours of autistic spectators within these settings are a core reason as to why having spaces that allow autistic theatregoers to express them is so important. These cultures of theatregoing situate an audience as hostile to perceived disruptive elements. Hannah Simpson contextualises the genesis of this culture, and writes that:

> Some of the clearest examples of the British theatre audience being explicitly trained in a new quiet etiquette, however, can be pinpointed in 1950s mainstream UK theatre onwards[…]A combination of class and generational anxieties in the long post war period in Britain saw

[154] Ibid.

> audience etiquette being not only fiercely policed, but also carefully taught with instruction on quiet-audience etiquette coming from theatre venues, practitioners, and media critics.[155]

As a result, Simpson proposes that:

> today's regulating of audience behaviour has become primarily a matter of self-policing by the collective audience. With the exception of ushers' requests to switch off mobile phones and the occasional stage-door outburst from the likes of Cumberbatch, most audience etiquette is now enforced by other spectators rather than through the theatre's authority figures. [156]

Simpson here argues that current cultures around audience self-policing of atypical behaviour have become part of the cultural identity of British theatregoing. Having such an embedded way of behaving in the theatre has only served to deny access for far too long to autistic and intellectually disabled people, as their presence is interpreted as potentially disruptive.

Caroline Heim presents a differing view of audience behaviours and theatre etiquette from Simpson. For Heim, audience behaviour shifts towards more expressive forms of spectatorship due to musical theatre in the 1980s, laying out that:

> some musicals tentatively invited the audience to play a more performative role, luring them out of the shadows into better lit spaces. Some characters crossed the footlights into the spectatorial space, teasing the audience to break out of the inertia. Some actors went so far as to play the role of the audience, applauding the audience at the curtain call.[157]

For Heim, contemporary theatre etiquette is a codified script for audience performance within the auditorium in contrast to the more oppressive sets of audience etiquette that Simpson argues for. Heim sees contemporary audience practices as fundamentally expressive, moving away from the

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[155] Hannah Simpson, 'Tics in The Theatre: The Quiet Audience, The Relaxed Performance, and The Neurodivergent Spectator', *Theatre Topics*, Vol.28, (November, 2018) pp.227-238, (pp.227-228).
[156] Ibid., p.228.
[157] Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016) p.80.

practices of silence more common from the late 19th century onwards through the post war period in Britain. As Heim summarises: 'The introduction of new technologies in the auditorium in the turn of the millennium heralded novel ways for audiences to perform.' [158]This meant that as a result, as Heim develops, the 'first decade of the twenty-first century was a time when the concept of audience performance was re-imagined.'[159] Contemporary theatre culture has shifted away from the idea of respectable silence in theatres, and towards more expressive ways of audiences engaging with performance. The jukebox musical is a crystallization of this contemporary way of behaving within theatre auditoriums, while more immersive or participatory performances seek to explore the role of audience as performer. Despite these culture shifts however, these behaviours are still very much encoded parts of contemporary theatre etiquette, as opposed to any true freedom of expression for the audience. The theatre auditorium remains an inhospitable place for many autistic spectators who find themselves incompatible with a codified set of behaviours that do not consider how they see and engage with the world. Any behaviour still deemed other within the auditorium is policed by other audience members.

3.4: Quirky spectatorship formation and structure

This approach to audiences and quirky practices structurally presents to us a manifestation of the audience that is inherently quirky by meshing three different spectatorship models – Q&A, traditional theatregoing and participatory performance – together in a way that seems to disregard the structure of all three in place of its own autistic theatrical structure. As Milan Zvada writes: 'Here, the dramaturg is an ideologist who creates the theatre's profile (poetics) in terms of issues relevant to one's social/cultural habitat.'[160] Zvada situates the creation and form of the theatre as contingent on the social and cultural contexts it is being formulated within. So, the disregard of a more normative theatrical structure for a collection of different models of spectating emphasises a

[158] Ibid., p.81.
[159] Ibid.
[160]Milan Zvada, 'Dramaturgy as A Way of Looking into The Spectator's Aesthetic Experience', *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2016) pp.202-207 (p.206).

clear political and cultural articulation of the wants and needs to express a dissonance from more traditional spectatorship models that have proven ineffective for many autistic audiences. Patel's emphasis on disrupting the traditional form of the theatre audience points towards a need to underscore the importance of agency and advocacy on the part of the autistic individual.

These practices extend beyond Q&A sections within *Sometimes I Leave*, but also incorporate direct audience participation within the enactments of treatments and tasks that Patel carries out during his performance. Of particular focus is Patel's routine of skipping a rope as a form of physical therapy. In this scene, skipping ropes are lined across the floor, as Patel slowly and progressively adds more and more rope to his jumping routine, to the point that the physical act of jumping becomes extremely laborious or impossible. This disruption in the task leads into Patel's 'breakdown section', in which he enacts and deconstructs his overstimulation and their triggers when things do not go as he envisioned. Audience members take part within Patel's skipping routine both as an assistant in the task and being framed as medical experts within the context of the exercise. Audience members assume the role of experts or assume the mantle of knowledge bearers. When Patel becomes overstimulated the tasks themselves begin to break down and fail due to their absurdity or physical impossibility of the task. These moments further solidify the neuroqueer in *Sometimes I Leave*, imaging and repurposing the ways in which autism is read and made visible. Patel's performance helps to frame the quirky audience as a relation between viewer and subject, and the epistemological politics of spectatorship and autism.

Quirky dramaturgy imagines the ways in which we picture autistic spectatorship and cognition and move beyond stereotypes that are propagated by a number of psychological theories and frameworks. As Petra Kuppers argues:

> The psychological stereotype says that disabled people want to be 'normal'. The stereotype denies disability culture as a positive experience. Given this assumption, to slide towards the

other (from disabled to able) is always already too easy to conflate with the desire to be other-than-disabled." [161]

Kuppers argues that these psychological stereotypes engage in curative languages that situates disabled identities as something to be corrected so as to allow people to live 'normal' lives. Such a narrow curative framework of imaging neurodivergent and learning-disabled people situates their identities as something to be erased, and fails to account for the experiences of such people. *Sometimes I Leave* positions this through the ways in which audiences read, engage and understand the relationship between autism and medical frameworks. Patel's performance of autism cures and the audience's role as participants through the tasks and the Q&As constructs a quirky dramaturgical experience that encourages audiences to neuroqueer the curative languages that mark them as other. This is enacted through direct interrogation with the tasks or the artist and promoting an advocate model for self-expression that challenges our neuronormative society. McConachie makes a scathing assessment, arguing that:

> the ability to maintain clear divisions between the cultures of science and the humanities, although a no-brainer in 1959, is fast eroding […]The evolutionary and cognitive sciences have been at the center of this epistemological sea change. While philosophers attentive to these disciplines understand that the sciences have the empirical tools to turn age-old philosophical dilemmas into relatively straightforward scientific problems, they also know that solving these problems will not deliver Objective Scientific Truth. [162]

McConachie here situates these epistemological tensions as part of an ideological divide within the humanities and the sciences in relation to objectivism. These issues therefore are relevant within the context of *Sometimes I Leave*. Patel frames autism and the medical establishment as being in tension as curative models of treatment look for objective confirmation of autism as a debilitating

[161] Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2003) p.51.
[162] McConachie, p.6.

illness to be rid of. And we as audience members are agents in the disruption of neuronormative curative frameworks and imaging instead new ways of engaging with one another. Of course, the examples given by Patel are at the extreme fringes of pseudo-scientific methods, and as such the academic weight of these treatments is less than zero but it nonetheless, situates the ways in which these languages and methods make readable the autistic body. And more considered frameworks within academia such as theory of mind also do this exact thing – positioning themselves as some objective form of neurology that disregards various other contexts. As previously discussed, the misconceptions that come with theory of mind also limit the ways in which we might think about autism and theatre spectatorship. Reframing this issue then is imperative, and quirky dramaturgy as a theory and practice is important in helping shift the ideological paradigm created by theory of mind to something relaxed, flexible and neuroqueer.

McGrath situates these curative languages as failing to understand autistic perceptions. McGrath writes that:

> At times, the dominant emphasis on systematising as the foundation of autistic subjectivity seems to say more about medical science – and how scientists construct autistic thinking according to their values-then it does about the realities and varieties of autism."[163]

McGrath positions medical frameworks as having been situated around the perceptions of researchers with an outside looking in approach. The criticism McGrath lays at the door of medical science here is an almost meta, self-referential research methodology that is more concerned with examining the biases of the researcher as opposed to creating effective, proportional research about autistic cognition. It is impossible to create a truly unbiased piece of research, as all research is subject to the biases of the researchers, be it a conscious or unconscious act. But, poor pieces of autism research that in its language or its methods seeks to impose ableist and curative languages

[163] James McGrath, Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity (London: Bowman and Littlefield, 2017) p.62.

upon the autistic person, does propagate and promote dangerous misconceptions about autistic people.

3.5: Oily Cart and Audience Kinesthetics

This reframing away from theory of mind towards a focus on relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness is present in Oily Cart's *All Wrapped Up,* where they use participation within quirky dramaturgical practices to situate autistic spectators within the theatre event. The performance begins with a performer peeling back a paper door, inviting them to also assist in tearing away of the paper. Walking inside, we are welcomed by the sight of the unwrapped world of *All Wrapped Up,* fabric and paper covering the performance space. It is here, where we are greeted with DJ Beau, the 'sound sorceress' and the 'Shadow Man'. Anxious at being exposed to the light and being seen, the 'Shadow Man' attempts to shield himself from the light, covering himself in bubble wrap and hiding his head in a box. A 'ball of light' moves around the audience, welcoming the children and their families to play with it and move around. Another character, known as Phoebe 'The Guardian', gathers the children around an obstacle course of tape and paper, allowing them the chance to move around and play with material and navigate the space. The show ends with a paper dragon appearing, the audience making fire noises as it breathes its fire, before to is finally put back inside the box. Despite the primary show coming to an end however, children and their family were welcome after the show to explore and play within the performance space, playing with the lights and materials from the show, and taking pleasure in casting shadows. *All Wrapped Up* shows how quirky dramaturgy engages with autistic theatregoers by having them participate in the environment of the performance event. Here the performance uses the quirky within its performance to imagine and make direct intersections into the performance making process by allowing their autistic child audiences to play and create within the performance. This fusing of play and performance, of allowing audiences the creative freedom to express and stimulate themselves cognitively and kinaesthetically situates the audience as more than just a political body. More importantly, they are

positioned as part of a theatregoing practice that discards the behaviourism which traditional spectator frameworks thrust upon those who attend performance events. This focus on play and performance is particularly important for autistic audiences for as Evan Thompson emphasises:

> Once the infant understands other individuals as intentional beings and herself as one participant among others in a social interaction, then whole new cognitive dimensions arise. The child comes to be able to participate in joint attention scenes – social interactions in which the child and adult jointly attend to some third thing, for an extended period of time, and in which the child can conceptualise her own role from the same 'outside' perspective as the other person. Joint attentional scenes in turn provide the framework for the acquisition of language, symbolic representation, and communicative conventions.[164]

Thompson situates participation through engagement in 'joint attention scenes' that help autistic children to conceptualise the perspectives of others outside of their own headspace, thus helping them in their development of social and communication skills. More specifically within the context of quirky dramaturgy, this can be a productive and social experience within safe inclusive spaces that encourage perceived atypical behaviours and enable and facilitate an emotional and socially communicative growth, all the while not detracting from the individual pleasure and enjoyment of the performance that they are engaged with. As Shaughnessy points out, 'it is the materiality of the immersive environment and its affordances which develop deeper levels of empathic engagement.'[165]Lee Phillips, a performer in Oily Cart's production of *All Wrapped Up*, explains the importance of understanding the needs of their audience for the show saying that 'Well we developed the story and see what fits in, and also work with kids who have complex needs, and also, like, to be prepared because you might see other kids with complex needs in the audience.'[166] The structure of *All Wrapped Up* was constructed from the ground up with disabled audiences in mind,

[164] Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,2010) p.399.
[165] Shaughnessy, 'Imagining Otherwise', pp321-334 (p.329).
[166] Lee Phillips, quoted in, Oily Cart, *Lee-Phillips-Performing in All Wrapped Up*, Online Video Recording, www.youtube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qts5IHUzjy4 (March 10, 2020) [Accessed 12/2/23]

and how they could best accommodate and engage with children with complex needs. The freedom afforded by the children and their parents to freely engage and explore, and the encouragement of play by creating their own 'joint attention scenes', creates a relaxed, flexible atmosphere within the theatre space that encouraged their audience to explore their relationship to the world around them within the world of *All Wrapped Up.*

The 'Being with in Sensory Theatre' report by Oily Cart artistic director Ellie Griffiths and Dr.Jill Goodwin, Oil Cart's researcher-in-residence, articulates their approaches to performance and audience engagement. They write that:

> In the last three years, Oily Cart have consciously shifted towards using language in line with the Social Model of Disability, which importantly came from, and has ownership by, the disabled community. Adopting the Social Model of Disability means recognising that the barriers disabled people face are created by society rather than by an individual's difference to the so-called 'norm'.[167]

Imperative for Oily Cart is the ways in which they frame audience agency, shaping their arts practice around understanding the potential physical and cognitive barriers any child with difficulties might face, and appropriately shaping their shows around this understanding. Griffiths and Goodwin emphasise this point in their practice, by conveying that:

> As practitioners working with children who experience the most barriers to access, we have to tread a difficult line at times. We know that children who express themselves in ways other than through verbal language may understand much more than they can show us. Within the education sector, an important distinction is sometimes made between profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) and profound and multiple barriers to learning (PMBL). This distinction seeks to recognise what might be hugely differing cognitive capacities contained

[167] Jill Goodwin, Ellie Griffiths, *'Being With' in Sensory Theatre*, (September 6, 2022) p.19.

> within similarly disabled bodies. In our work we may have no opportunity to discover the cognitive capacity of an audience member, and in these circumstances to 'presume competence' is often viewed as the most respectful approach to take. To presume competence means to assume linguistic understanding in people who do not use verbal language to communicate.[168]

The use of non-verbal, visual and physical storytelling by Oily Cart that incorporates play and audience participation into the work highlights a commitment to creating work that does not seek to construct barriers because of the ways a person communicates. *All Wrapped Up* achieves this through their use of playtime with shadows, paper and the 'ball of light'. This allows the performers to embody their characters without the use of explicit dialogue, but rather through visual storytelling, such as the 'Shadow Man's fear of the light, which is conveyed by their use of materials around the space to hide from the light. The way participation is used is non-intrusive and up to the audience member if they wish to engage or sit back. The freedom of allowing an autistic audience member to express themselves is at the core of quirky dramaturgy. Griffiths and Goodwin highlight this point, as for them, 'That there can be meaning without any sense of productivity or action is important.'[169] Fundamental to this is understanding that there are different ways an autistic person might communicate, some are verbal, others non-verbal. An autistic person might have different triggers or access needs, and work should maintain an understanding flexible approach in order to best ensure relaxed safe environments for autistic theatregoers.

The way in which an autistic audience member might cognitively or kinaesthetically participate in *All Wrapped Up* neuroqueers the neuronormative models of audience engagements. For example, the play time of *All Wrapped Up*, the playing with the lights and shadows, the stimming (the repetition of movements or noises by someone with autism) and the engaging with the fiction of the world Oily Cart, all of these actions by the audience articulates an autistic subjectivity that

[168] Ibid., p.23.
[169] Ibid.,p.30.

makes being an autistic spectator a political act. These acts within the performance event situate the ways in which the quirky neuroqueers the logics of audience behaviour and emotion by applying quirky theatrical practices into the ways in which autistic audiences might engage with performance. Therefore, we get a more politically engaged, self-advocacy focused model of framing the autistic brain that begins to move autistic audiences away from being perceived as mind blind. Robin Roscigno emulates this point, arguing that 'neuroqueering can act as a fugitive practice that resists discourses of rights/recognition shaped by the neoliberal principles of individual freedom, rationality and capitalist production.'[170] Roscigno situates neuroqueering as a politically engaged act interested in self-advocacy that seeks to subvert neoliberal discourses. These discourses often act on the notion of emphasising difference or otherness, and generate both misinformation and cultural dissonance between neurodivergent and neurotypical people. And while it would be brash to assume that theory of mind is somehow a manifestation of neoliberalism, of which it clearly is not, it is important to underscore that it has led to misconceptions about how we imagine mentalizing for autistic individuals. Acts of making the autistic spectator visible, and making the visibility of the autistic theatregoer a distinct political act, stakes claim to the importance of art and culture for many autistic individuals, and their right to access and engage with it. Quirky dramaturgical practices disrupt neuronormative frameworks within traditional theatrical settings for audiences, which results in an autistic theatregoer being able to freely express their autism and engage with the performance.

It is precisely this manner of quirky audience participation that Oily Cart uses to engage with their autistic audiences. The play time that occurs after the performance of *All Wrapped Up* allows audiences the chance to interact with the world of the performance though making shadows within the unwrapped world of the show. Given torches, the audience are allowed the chance to play, express and respond to the world of the performance in a way that enables audiences to engage

[170] Robin Roscigno, 'Neuroqueerness as Fugitive Practice: Reading Against the Grain of Applied Behavioural Analysis Scholarship', *Educational Studies*, Vol.55 (July, 2019) pp.405-419 (p.406).

with the show in a way that feels comfortable to them. There is a distinct focus throughout *All Wrapped Up* in the pleasures of doing, and the kinaesthetic enjoyments within the performance of the social engagements between audience and performer. Quirky dramaturgy emphasises the importance of this pleasure in the promotion and self-expression of autistic audiences challenging neuronormative behavioural frameworks, and showcasing the benefits that theatre and performance have for the autistic spectator. More so, Oily Cart's emphasis on their performance's being relaxed performances, weaves the interconnected importance of space and audience together in order to underscore the need for safety within quirky dramaturgical practices, because this allows autistic audiences to freely express themselves. Moreover, expression and engagement do not need be direct to involve audiences in the theatrical action, as Shaughnessy points out:

> This need not involve joining in the action (although the invitation is there to do so), as engagement can be registered through shared eye contact, pointing, bodily responses as children rock in their chairs in excitement, physically responding to the rhythms and energies of the performers around them."[171]

Participation is not just relegated to the end of the show for autistic audience members to play, but rather interaction and participation are weaved and sewn fibres into the fabric of the show itself. When for instance a performer attempts to rip through a paper door to allow spectators into the unwrapped world, audience members are allowed to join in and help in the processing of unlocking the door. Likewise, the unwrapped world itself is full of an assortment of paper and other materials which one might use to make their own presents with. Indeed, the show is designed to help stimulate and help the audience of autistic children make a diverse range of interactions from engagement with the performer to more insular enjoyment in taking pleasure in the material qualities of the unwrapped world within a relaxed performance setting. Griffiths and Goodwin

[171]Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice*, (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.243.

believe that by, 'Relinquishing our reliance on language may also make space for us to witness the disabled child's whole being without filtering what we see through a raft of pre-conceptions and projections.'[172] Free from neuronormative models of communication and expression, autistic children can find ways to be themselves and grow in ways that seem natural to them. Oily Cart's engagement with quirky dramaturgy is at its core about the ways in which spaces become relaxed, flexible, and neuroqueer. Quirky dramaturgy has no social stakes involved in one's expression of their autism, instead it wants autistic people to revel and take pleasure in the ephemerality of the performance world. While Patel's engagement is about political engagement with medical and theoretical frameworks of autism, Oily Cart instead is more concerned with the personal engagement each audience member might have within an immersive world that they are a visitor of, in contrast to a more stilted structure of participation and traditional audience layouts. While this is not per se a negative thing, it does emphasise how quirky audiences behave in two different performance settings, and highlights the diverse creative experiences from artists and theatregoers alike within the making, doing and viewing of art. Speaking of Oily Cart, Shaughnessy reiterates this point, writing that:

> In Oily Cart's performances, the 'theatre/therapy' debate is challenged through work which is praised by theatre critics (Gardner and Billington), whilst its engagement of individual audience members with profound learning difficulties is clearly enabling and beneficial to those involved.[173]

Shaughnessy situates Oily Cart's performance practice as seeking to make more proactive engagements with autistic theatregoers, using a vibrant participation and visual style that is both stimulating and pleasurable. From the presents, to the glowing orbs of light that performers throw, to playing with lights, all the while encouraging participation and engagement, the autistic children

[172] Goodwin and Griffiths, p.38.
[173] Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance*, p.241.

seeing *All Wrapped Up* are given flexibility in the things that they can do within the performance space. The quirky dramaturgical frameworks therefore differ between Patel and Oily Cart. *Sometimes I Leave* is interested in neuroqueering readings of autistic bodies. Oily Cart too might be interested in challenging the frameworks that Patel and his quirky audience intervene in, but they are much more focused on the individual self-expression that an autistic child might find in finding a space that encourages and welcomes the quirky practices other spectatorship frameworks do not accommodate for.

Shaughnessy emphasises this point in her writing of Oily Cart's performance practices, proposing that:

> whilst Oily Cart's work generally involves loose narrative structures, the focus is on being in the moment, within a temporal framework in which the autistic individual foregrounds the present experience and relates to the immediacy of the encounters within the environment s/he inhabits.[174]

Shaughnessy argues that Oily Cart takes a post theatrical approach to making work. The temporal and aesthetic qualities of *All Wrapped Up*, the world that audiences themselves inhabit, the moments of play and interaction, and the situating of the real world as a portal into the unwrapped world as audiences open the door between worlds, all emphasise the intersections between social and theatrical realities. Audiences leave behind one set of logics and behaviours of time and space for another set of laws within the unwrapped world created by Oily Cart. And within such worlds we can begin to imagine and treat autistic behaviours not as 'disruptive' elements. It is within this reality, and the ways in which audiences interact with the world and the performers, that quirky audiences begin to neuroqueer behavioural frameworks that have been laid out by Heim and Simpson. Hans-Thies Lehmann argues that:

[174] Ibid., p.242.

> It is hardly a coincidence that we find in contemporary theatre a persistent return to the metaphor of the world as a hospital or delusional world, a world where there is no alternative but the equally catastrophic withdrawal into solipsistic isolation.[175]

Lehmann speaks here of the staging of the real, of visibility, and of the ways in which reality and the fantastical might blend together to challenge one's perception of either. The moment of the door within *All Wrapped Up* then is an interesting intersection between worlds that suggests the logics of the unwrapped world are in fact the social reality, and that the audience's behaviour is not part of some fictitious other universe, but rather are very real behaviours and sensations that should be cultivated, celebrated and developed. Quirky dramaturgy makes the worlds that the audience inhabits during performance events sites of cultivation and celebration, of inverting normative logics so autistic perceptions and behaviours are seen as the 'normative' framework. Developing on the workshops for autistic children done by herself and others, Shaughnessy writes that:

> The immersive environments facilitate a 'level of commonality' between performer practitioners and participants. The environments offer a space to explore, play and to hide. The children are free to move inside and outside, bringing the space to life through their physical interaction and experiencing themselves 'inside a space of time'…Many participants in *Imagining Autism* seek a sense of the whole space initially and explore its parameters before finding a focus and developing a personal choreography.[176]

Shaughnessy situates these forms of participation as having a relationship between audience and space in creating sites of performance and theatrical realities that allow autistic spectators chances to express themselves and play. Beyond this, the breaking down of the roles of performer and audience within these frameworks emphasises the self-advocacy elements at play within participatory performance for autistic theatregoers. In having an open means of engagement with

[175]Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2006) p.166.
[176] Shaughnessy, 'Imagining Otherwise', pp321-334 (pp.236-237).

the fiction of the performance and the performers, participatory performance can allow autistic audiences the chance to be affected by performances in manners that best suit them.

3.6: Neuroqueering as a Quirky Audience Member

The ways audiences are framed through this quirky dramaturgy in these performances lays out the foundational ways in which an audience member might neuroqueer. That is because structurally the way in which Patel and Oily Cart frame their audiences goes against more traditional dramaturgical approaches to audiences within the theatrical event. The fundamental difference is the ways in which quirky audiences are framed as proactive participants in the theatrical event. Patel engages audiences in Q&As and his tasks while Oily Cart employ audiences in to explore their unwrapped world and the materials within. Quirky dramaturgical practices understand that a theatregoer's experience of theatre is not restricted to sitting within an auditorium. Likewise, this dramaturgical approach challenges the theatre etiquette cultures of contemporary UK theatres in place of more inclusive behavioural frameworks that welcome and encourage autistic behaviour. Patel and Oily Cart make audiences active participants in the world of the performance, as assistants, specialists, and explorers of strange new worlds. The audience is directly acknowledged to be present, with no fourth wall to imagine a distinct separation between audience and performer, with audience and performer existing as characters in the fiction of the performance. Audiences within this quirky practice also serve a narrative purpose helping to drive forward the plot of the performance. Katalin Trencésnyi writes of this process led dramaturgical process as having 'no contractual hierarchy or other working structure imposed on the makers.'[177] Patel's Q&A and Oily Cart's playtime have a loose framework of what format this nonhierarchic audience structure is, but the content of what happens within that framework is distinctly ephemeral and contingent on the potentially infinite number of responses that the audience member might have. One-night Patel and I are exchanging in a distinctly neuroqueer and autistic moment of audience and performer sociability. Hypothetically

[177] Trencésnyi, p.163.

on another night Patel might be asked his favourite film or song. The audiences of *All Wrapped Up* might want to play with different materials or different parts of the show world. Those kinaesthetic activities and pleasures might manifest in different ways for each different audience member.

The way in which quirky dramaturgies view the audience then should be understood as the intersectionality between the kinaesthetic and cognitive qualities of the autistic individual and the physical and metaphysical components that make up theatrical events. Specifically, in relation to the way Patel and Oily Cart organise and engage with their audiences, we can see this sort of practice manifest in the acknowledgement of the audience as part of their performance worlds. This dramaturgical choice to make audiences part of the stories being told by Patel and Oily Cart articulates the importance of visibility within theatre spaces for the autistic spectator. This means that, the purpose of the integration of the audiences into the performances themselves as participants and inhabitants within these fictional worlds is a direct contrast to theatre auditoriums and behavioural frameworks that have often excluded autistic audiences. And this makes a distinct and more focused approach to how an audience member might engage with their environment in contrast to the at times underwhelming dramaturgical approaches which some mainstream relaxed performances have.

Audience visibility and the framing of the autistic individual as an acknowledged present entity within the auditorium within quirky dramaturgies create acts of neuroqueering in two ways. Firstly, the artist or dramaturg has structured the audience for the performance event in opposition to neuronormative understandings of how an audience member should behave. Secondly, the audience members themselves are neuroqueering the politics of appropriateness and the logics of how one might behave within a space. These quirky approaches to audiences by Patel and Oily Cart beyond engaging with audiences, also underscore the ways in which neuronormative ways of thinking about audiences have shaped who is and who is not allowed access to theatre. Sedgman argues that 'In order to grasp the societal impacts of our dominant behavioural norms, we need to

pay attention to the subjectivities they variously validate and exclude.'[178] In using quirky dramaturgy as a means to create more accessible and engaging theatrical experiences for autistic theatregoers, autistic subjectivity can be validated. Continuing, Sedgman asks: 'When we legitimise certain behaviours over others, who is considered 'reasonable' and who 'unreasonable' as a social actor within public space?'[179] Quirky dramaturgy legitimises autistic traits deemed 'unreasonable' in more traditional settings, through which theatregoers neuroqueer those politics of sociability through their behaviour within a quirky performance.

The features of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness come together in both *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up* by breaking down the fourth wall in a way that helps autistic theatregoers feel legitimised. The lack of a fourth wall and the participation of audience members within the performances is in opposition to more traditional approaches to audiences being separate to the world of the performance. In this quirky dramaturgical practice, audiences can ask questions to the performer as is the case with Patel, or play with the props and environment as with Oily Cart. Audiences are tangible entities within the fiction of the performance that they can interact with. Audiences are also allowed to more freely express their autistic traits, such as stimming, while the performances themselves aid in making sure potential autistic triggers are minimised, creating the quirky spaces described in Chapter 2. It is within these ways of thinking about audience practice within the performance event that the autistic individual neuroqueers. Autistic responses to the performance both cognitively and kinaesthetically oppose the normative rhetoric of autism, the access that is not adequately provided, and the misconception that autistic behaviours are undesirable traits as an audience member.

[178] Kirsty Sedgman, *The Reasonable Audience*, *Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing and the Live Performance Experience* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.81.
[179] Ibid.

3.7: Self-Expression of the Autistic Theatregoer

Quirky dramaturgy uses a participation-focused means of spectating that encourages perceived atypical emotionality and selfhood in performance fictions that advocate for autistic identities. To this extent, to be an audience member within quirky dramaturgy is to neuroqueer the neuronormative frameworks of more traditional modes of spectatorship in place of a more flexible celebration of neurodiverse theatregoers. Roger Cardinal writes that 'the appeal of certain artworks might lie in their capacity to inspire a fantasy of participation whereby the viewer imagines joining in the very processes of their making.'[180] Cardinal situates the ways audiences might become active participants in the creative process of the work itself. Within the contexts of participatory performance and autism, we might see Cardinal's argument as situating autistic audiences as active agents in the access making decisions performance makers might make. Cardinal here is speaking more metaphysically than on a more practical level; however, Cardinal's claim certainly lays a foundation for autistic self-advocacy within participatory performance. Herein lies the core understanding of how quirky dramaturgy engages with autistic audiences. An autistic theatregoer rejects the normative frameworks of behaviour and affect in place of a more distinct self-expression of their atypicality, standing in resistance to the claims of autistic cognition and affect made by theory of mind.

All Wrapped Up situates itself within this discussion because it does not dictate one set way an audience member should be expected to engage the performance, but rather allows the audience members to each craft their own experience. The navigation of the space and allowing autistic audiences the chance to interact in the world created by Oily Cart, at once seeks to dismiss theory of mind by framing affect through flexible modes of participation for autistic people, and present in its place a quirky dramaturgical practice responsive to the needs of the individual.

[180] Roger Cardinal, 'Towards an Outsider Aesthetic' *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Michael Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf (London and Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1994) p.35.

Resultantly, quirky dramaturgy allowed for autistic audiences to engage with Patel's performance in a manner that takes them out of the clinics which Patel frames in his work, and into more relaxed and flexible environments that shifts the focus from those claiming ownership over autistic brains, to environments where autistic people can freely express themselves within relaxed spaces. Autistic audience members, through play and discovery, gain a greater understanding about their own cognitive and kinaesthetic relationships to environments and to other people. Quirky dramaturgy offers a pleasurable safe site of experimentation and navigation for autistic people to understand the languages of the neurotypical world without needing to sacrifice their own unique autistic outlooks on the world around them. As Shaughnessy explains, 'current research suggests that the autistic-brain and body process the world in a particular way and this creates an engagement with the physical and social environment.'[181] Shaughnessy argues that autistic people cognitively and kinaesthetically respond to the physical and social environments they are placed within. Having participatory and immersive theatrical experiences helps autistic people process performance and the world around them in a way that is comfortable for them and that makes sense

3.8: Disruptive Audiences

Both Patel and Oily Cart use quirky dramaturgical practices to put the power and agency in the hands of the theatregoer. This makes them active participants in the subversion of neuronormative dialogues over autistic identities. The Q&As of *Sometimes I Leave* and playtime of *All Wrapped Up* emphasise how audiences engaging with performers allows autistic theatregoing to become a subversion of neuronormative spectatorship frameworks. The quirky embraces the atypical, inverts neurotypical logics and instead exists within a continuum that no longer views such things as outside the sphere of the appropriate. Sometimes this manifest through contentious jostling between a moment of misunderstanding over the meaning of words, such as mine and Patel's moment of tension over the knowledge of passing, other times there is a more internal knowledge in the

[181] Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance*, p.235.

pleasures of doing, of playing. Yet both draw away from theory of mind, having encounters and cognitive and kinaesthetic moments that emphasise the facts that the autistic spectator can mentalize. Difficulties on the autistic spectator's part to mentalize are not part of some inherently broken element within themselves, but rather, it emphasises the need to teach and help us understand those skills. In those situations, quirky dramaturgical practices can be used as a form of teaching for autistic theatregoers to develop those skillsets in safe, inclusive environments that encourage autistic cognition and kinaesthesia. Shaughnessy found that 'It is the materiality of the immersive environment and its affordances which develop deeper levels of empathic engagement.'[182] Shaughnessy argues that it is immersive theatre environments and the ability to interact with elements of that environment, which allows autistic audiences to empathically engage with the performance. For instance, the door and the transition into the unwrapped world, the change in logics and materiality of worlds, alongside the freedom to play and engage with the world puts a distinct emphasis on the ways in which an autistic spectator might be able to engage with the performance, without feeling as though they have to sit down and watch action play out on a stage. It is under these paradigms that we can understand the way in which quirky dramaturgy engages with its audiences by letting autistic theatregoers explore within a space and the theatrical reality they exist within. Similarly, relaxedness creates comforting environments that make autistic people feel safe to express themselves within, which due to the participatory and immersive elements of quirky dramaturgical practices, allows audiences to flexibly engage with the performance however they see fit, resulting in them neuroqueering neuronormative understanding of theatre etiquette. In this way the autistic spectator never feels entrapped within some arbitrary system of behaviours, and thus never has to fear repercussions for being deemed a disruptive audience member.

This is an element and theme which is consistent throughout both *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up*: the 'disruptive audience member'. The participation and structuring of the audience

[182] Shaughnessy, 'Imagining Otherwise', pp321-334 (p.329).

within both productions create moments that emphasise their resistance to neuronormative modes of spectating. One moment to draw from here is the engagement between myself and Patel, with my question creating moments of autistic resistance and tension while deconstructing the broader ideological underpinnings that form autistic constructions of identity. Another significant moment to discuss in this regard occurs within the performance of *All Wrapped Up,* wherein a child walks into the main performance area as the actors begin unwrapping and playing with 'a ball of light'. Here, the performers incorporate the child into the action, by navigating around him, and encouraging him to play with the ball as the performers begin going into the audience, encouraging children to touch and feel the 'ball of light.'

These moments of disruption neuroqueer the structural framework of audience and performer, emphasising a different manner in which quirky dramaturgy advocates for autistic spectator behaviours. This alternative approach to more traditional audience behaviour frameworks, seeks to intervene in Sedgman's notion of the 'Reasonable Audience', as we seek to imagine ways of allowing a more accessible means of theatregoing that does not seek to exclude those deemed undesirable. Sedgman writes that 'The key question now is which kinds of attention afford more democratic experiences by promoting productive collaborative engagements: both with others in the audience, as well as with the wider world?'[183] In response to Sedgman's question, one might imagine the neuroqueer as the means through which autistic phenomenological experiences are framed, which as a result democratises the theatregoing experience for those engaging with quirky dramaturgy, in contrast to more traditional approaches to structuring the performance event

These moments of disruption within both performances emphasise the broader contexts of quirky frameworks wherein meaningful engagements exist between artists and audience. The way in which an audience member might be seen as 'disruptive' is framed differently within quirky and traditional contexts that evoke the ways in which the neuroqueer promotes free expression of

[183] Sedgman, p.36.

autistic behaviours not otherwise accepted within normative theatregoing contexts. The kinaesthetic elements of *All Wrapped Up* in conjunction with the interrogatory nature of audience engagements in *Sometimes I Leave* imagine different ways of doing and responding within a theatre space that first and foremost situates a diverse range of responses to performance that do not abide by the culture of theatre etiquette within the UK. Sedgman continues:

> In order to grasp the societal impacts of our dominant behavioural norms, we need to pay attention to the subjectivities they variously validate and exclude. When we legitimise certain behaviours over others, who is considered 'reasonable' and who 'unreasonable' as a social actor within public space?[184]

Patel and Oil Cart's spectator experiences and their engagement with their audiences evoke this very question of what we might think of as 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' audiences, and how behaviours deemed disruptive within one theatregoing framework might be seen as acceptable within another framework. If different cognitive approaches to responding to art and theatre exist, and if we exist as we do within such a predominantly neuronormative spectatorial framework, who might we be validating or excluding from theatre spaces? Or rather, how can we assume one singular framework of behaving within the theatre works for everyone, and in applying such a dominant cultural approach to how we behave as theatregoers, how many autistic people feel as though they do not have the frameworks available to them to enjoy performance in a 'reasonable' way? The politically charged discussion and participation of *Sometimes I Leave*, the excitement and explorative play of *All Wrapped Up*, these are ways of imagining autistic audiences behaving in ways that exist outside of the dominant modes of audience behaviour within the UK. What would happen under a normative framework if a child were to walk onto the stage during a performance, or audiences interrogate artists? What if an autistic spectator began to stim during the performance and the behaviour was policed by other theatregoers? What safety would those autistic audiences

[184] Ibid.,p.81.

have if the need to neuroqueer was intently restricted and policed by those that saw their behaviour not as expressions of autistic identity, but deviant disruptive behaviours.

Quirky dramaturgy is important because safety and freedom are assured, and theatregoers may freely and happily neuroqueer the oppressive neuronormative hierarchies that have policed and restricted their right to be autistic and express themselves. Patel and Oily Cart both do so in ways that promote and celebrate autistic audiences, rather than resisting and policing autistic behaviours. Neuroqueerness is the means through which we can understand autistic phenomenological responses within the theatre, making audiences disrupt the cultural and political structures that have pushed autistic people out of the sphere of audience experientiality. Patel's Q&As and Oily Cart's post show play time articulates an importance in making audiences active agents within quirky frameworks that seek to emphasise the vast range of ways in which individuals perceive other people and the wider world. Within both performances, the shared experiences of the audiences within quirky dramaturgical practices creates a sense of shared understanding and communication that discards the notions that autistic selfhood is an inherently 'disruptive' element within spectatorship. As Melanie Yergeau writes:

> when one's communication isn't seen as communication, it is hard to build a space in which anything is rhetorically negotiated or shared, in which rhetor's intention predicts an audience's perception. That is, the assumption is that autism represents, or instigates, rhetorical failure and social miscommunication.[185]

Yergeau situates access as being contingent on the shared understanding of one's cognition. Yergeau frames autism as inherently disruptive within neuronormative frameworks. When autism is already framed as an inherently disruptive aspect, the conception of access for autistic audiences becomes

[185] Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism : On Rhetoric and Neurological* Queerness (Michigan: Duke University Press, 2018), p.143.

difficult to achieve if one does not understand the cognitive and kinaesthetic qualities of autism. This underscores the inherent failure of theatre etiquette and spectatorship culture within the UK.

When participating and engaging as an audience member in *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up*, there is an acute awareness of a different way of behaving within a performance space, a different manner where as a spectator, perceived transgressions will not be pointed out and policed. As audiences helped Patel with his performative treatments and children play with lights, tapes and a ball of light in *All Wrapped Up*, a different audience experience manifests that most certainly presents visibility. There is a playfulness and tongue in cheek 'disruptive' element to how the audiences in both shows clamour, explore, help, interrogate or just mess around, which is equal parts a political articulation of one's self to not be deemed disruptive for not fitting into normative frameworks, and an expression of safety in the knowledge that the behaviours of the autistic audience member are free from the social stakes and implications present within a more traditional theatregoing setting.

Sedgman writes that 'codes of behaviour believed to benefit society as a whole often work to reinforce problematic power relations: by privileging normative bodies and obscuring the needs of others.'[186]Participation based models of performance are of particular interest as a structural form of quirky dramaturgy, as they enable an explorative and interactive framework that encourages the free expression of autistic behaviours that would otherwise be seen as atypical and disruptive within more traditional audience settings. *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up,* presents these possibilities by allowing autistic audiences the freedom to play, interrogate and explore. We see here that quirky dramaturgy is a theory and practice that positions autistic audiences as free to express their kinaesthetic and cognitive qualities as individuals. The sensory based elements of the shows alongside the transitions from social to dramatic reality, alongside the access elements, presents a dramaturgical framework that encourages audiences to neuroqueer by providing

[186] Sedgman, p.99.

theatregoing experiences that welcome autistic behaviours and perspectives. Yergeau writes of the potentiality that comes from such actions saying that 'There is something proactive in claiming irreducible defiance as unabashedly neuroqueer. Where normative rhetorics reduce, neuroqueer rhetorics defiantly stim.'[187] Ergo, actions such as stimming or other behavioural qualities of the autistic theatregoer are resistances against the reductivity of neuronormative rhetoric. Within the context of the theatre, we might approach this through the lens of theatre etiquette for instance, which favours a specific system of behaviours and reduces behavioural frameworks that are seen as other to it. In these contexts, autistic people are framed as disruptive elements to the theatregoing experiences of the audience. This can make access to theatre for people who are autistic difficult or stressful if they themselves are not aware of the social contract signed by spectators when entering a theatre

Quirky dramaturgy approaches the idea of spectatorship or seeing a performance less as sitting in a dark auditorium watching action on stage, and more about interactive and sensory based experiences that stimulate and provide autistic audiences with the theatrical experiences that best reflect their perception of the world around them. Both *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up* situate the audience in a way where they are acknowledged present agents within the fiction of the performance world. They also integrate a number of different structural elements from different performance styles into the work in a way that gives the performance and audience interaction that distinctly quirky quality. It is this emphasis on the atypical and the challenging of form and structure that manifests different shapes and ways of spectating within both performances, but also actively makes the quirky audience member visible and able to engage with the performer or the performance world. As Berndt and Turner explain:

[187] Yergeau, p.84.

> much contemporary work exposes and explores its own dramaturgical process and thus calls on a dramaturgical sensibility from all those involved, including not only the dramaturg, writer and director, but also the 'actor-dramaturg' and the individual spectator.[188]

This view is also shared by Zvada, who in advocating for an interactive approach argues that:

> basic dramaturgic categories, conflict and dialogue as observed in life, should get rid of their traditional forms. Interactivity in theatre can be based on forces released from these new forms as a means to an end, which does not imply resolution, meaning, or story unfolded but spectator affected. [189]

Turner, Berndt and Zvada all situate this interactive dramaturgic approach as rejecting traditional theatre structure, whereby the interactive dynamics of audience and performer might manifest from such change. We have already seen this rejection of traditional theatrical structure in Chapter 2 with the access alterations that relaxed performances make in order to accommodate autistic audiences. This relaxed policy and the spatial alterations made within the body of the theatre building bring to the forefront the needs of the audience against the institution. And while that tension, as discussed, causes issues of policy making and effective understanding of the autistic audiences being catered for to arise, here Turner, Berndt and Zvada place a distinct focus on the spectator as fundamental to dramaturgical methodology. The form which the performance takes is secondary to the effect of the audience. Participatory practices such as Oily Cart are a prime example of this interactive approach to audiences by situating the story of *All Wrapped Up* as a loose series of happenings within the unwrapped world, emphasising flexibility in how an autistic theatregoer wishes to explore the world of the performance. For Oily Cart, the process of play and exploration within the world they have created is of more value than a traditional narrative

[188] Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Revised Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.27.
[189] Zvada, p.205

structure, which encourages their autistic audiences to play and explore their relationship to the world and with one another.

Moments such as myself and Patel's moment of conflict, or autistic children playing and engaging with the world of *Unwrapped*, posit the importance of using neurodivergent brains and perspectives to challenge perceived behavioural practices of appropriateness, and instead make visible the autistic spectator. Quirky dramaturgy is useful in understanding the ways in which autistic audiences can self-advocate and make political the exclusion from, and lack of access in traditional theatrical frameworks for them. Graça P. Corrêa sees that:

> as normative ideology subtly permeates the most intimate levels of our individual existences though mainstream media controlled by a few conglomerates, a dramaturgically informed political theatre is crucial to preventing the decline in diversity of perspectives, as well as the censorship of vital issues."[190]

Quirky dramaturgy offers a means through which a diverse range of theatre making practices that exist beyond neuronormative frameworks might be readily accessed and experienced. A diverse range of ways in which we as theatregoers might choose to experience or think about the performance event is imperative in creating a diverse and robust range of theatre that provides access and visibility to those who find more traditional spectatorship experiences inaccessible.

Quirky dramaturgy is a means of understanding and underscoring the ways in which autistic spectators relate to performance that at once is both a means of allowing theatregoers to express difference while also going against theory of mind frameworks. The theatre can be a site of understanding autistic emotionality within a setting and theoretical framework that does not seek to read cognitive difference against some imagined typical neurological functionality. The quirky audience is a means of creating agency for the autistic spectator and allowing them to express

[190] Graça P. Corrêa, 'Dramaturg as Context Manager: A Phenomenological and Political Practice', *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015) pp.308-312 (p.312).

perceived atypical behaviours freely. This is achieved through the usage of participatory performance as a means of breaking down normative behavioural structures, which promotes a more accessible mode spectating for autistic theatregoers. Nicola Shaughnessy emphasises the importance of participatory performance for autistic audiences, writing that:

> Working as co-performers in participatory performance, we discovered new languages, new insights into the imagination, new perspectives on the relations between self, other and the world and new understandings of how these are processed in autism.[191]

Shaughnessy situates participatory performance as creating new systems of meaning in relation to the research of autism, and how it impacts the autistic individual. Shaughnessy sees such approaches as important to understanding the autistic spectator, and thus understanding the ways in which participation-based theatre helps underpin the importance of autistic theatregoing experiences. By creating experiences and frameworks that work with autistic people, provide access to them, and do not actively seek to exclude them from performance event on the grounds of being a disruptive factor, we can begin to think about the ways in which neuronormative notions of appropriateness within the theatre negatively impact and restrict who has access to the arts.

3.9: Conclusion

Quirky dramaturgy is concerned with how theatrical composition might accommodate autistic audiences and how they might interact with the environment and world around them. This is done by constructing atypical theatrical elements that reject traditionalist ideas about form and structure within performance. This chapter has examined, how quirky dramaturgical theories and practices challenge UK theatre etiquette frameworks and theory of mind. This is achieved through immersive participatory performances that allow autistic audiences to express themselves cognitively and kinaesthetically. Quirky dramaturgy neuroqueers theory of mind and the

[191] Shaughnessy, 'Imagining Otherwise', pp321-334 (p.326).

neuronormative understandings of affect that misinform autistic behaviour, while the immersive and participatory elements of *Sometimes I Leave* and *All Wrapped Up* create relaxed and flexible spaces for audience, while critiquing the methodologies of the cognitive sciences and their framing of autistic cognition.

Quirky dramaturgy creates performance environments that allow for audiences to neuroqueer neuronormative theoretical frameworks such as theory of mind, ensuring a freedom and safety for autistic audiences to engage with performance in the ways in which they feel most comfortable. To be a quirky audience member is to make known and celebrate autistic engagement with art, and to understand the diverse range of cognitive and kinaesthetic responses which theatregoers might have. Although we might indeed understand the neuroscientific perspectives of emotionality, we must also understand that these neurological frameworks of understanding affect are contingent on the neurology of the spectator themselves, and thus neurodivergent people and neurotypical people might find differences in the ways in which they enjoy, consume and think about art. Neuronormative biases and misconceptions about autistic people have affected both the culture of UK theatre etiquette and its exclusionary aspects for many autistic people, something Chapter 2 also emphasised in its exploration into relaxed performance, and the understandings of autistic experiences and the autistic brain. The neuroqueer elements in quirky dramaturgy, allows the autistic spectator to freely expresses themselves without the tethering of some neurological expectation, creating a theatregoing practice which both challenges neuronormative hierarchies and emphasises the ways in which artist and audience can engage to create new and accessible pieces of performance.

Chapter 4: [Dis] Comfort within Quirky Performance Making

This chapter will examine how the features of quirky dramaturgy operate within the sphere of the performer showcasing quirky dramaturgy by creating accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence in the spaces and places of theatre and performance while responding to their unique needs. The work of autistic performance makers is an imperative part of quirky dramaturgy, with performers creating the spatial logics of the performances with which autistic audiences engage. The artist is an important part of the ways in which the theory and practice of quirky dramaturgy can be shown to be a means for self-advocacy. In particular, this chapter will examine the role of the autistic artist in positioning themselves within the arts sector exploring how the feature of neuroqueerness is used to create [dis]comfort within their work. In analysing the practices of quirky dramaturgy within the work of artists Cian Binchy and Xandri Selwyn, I will examine how quirky dramaturgy brings to light fundamental issues within arts employment for autistic people. [Dis]comfort is an integral part of the way in which both Binchy and Selwyn use their practices to present the ways relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness can help autistic artists. It is through the lived experiences of the autistic artist that the text and the world of the performance are created making visible the everyday lives of autistic people and demystifying ableist autistic stereotypes. As I will argue in this chapter, the lived experiences of. autistic people are the texts that quirky dramaturgy structures for the stage thereby bringing forth [dis]comfort for the audience.

[Dis]comfort I will argue, comes from neuroqueering neuronormative readings of autistic identities when the audience is faced with a live autistic body upon the stage. Through this, I will show how the quirky dramaturgical practices of Binchy and Selwyn go about embodying and satirising these neuronormative rhetorical approaches, and how their use of [dis]comfort articulates the wider art employment issues which autistic people face. For Binchy in the *Access All Areas* production *MADHOUSE Re:Exit* at the Shoreditch Town Hall in 2018, this is present through his

persona of the man baby exploring sideways approaches to growing up as a means to attack the infantilisation of autistic people by neurotypicals. Selwyn's 2019 performance of *#Binariesbegone* at the Autism Arts Festival*,* presents a dystopic future where gender and sexuality have been outlawed and society operates free of identity politics. Selwyn's production page for this performance says that we should:

> Join Sylvie as she/they bring us into the historical gendered world of 2018 where girls will be girls and boys will be boys and where diversity is not yet an outlawed term. What an archaic world that was. We're now thankful that the revolution really did equalise our everyday relations and difference is no more.[192]

Drawing on their experiences as a non-binary autistic person, Selwyn argues for the importance of personal ways of self-identifying through their persona of Sylvie, a grotesque parody of gendered stereotypes that as this future's attempt to perform the past. Both performances deal with [dis]comfort in distinct ways that as I will highlight, begin to articulate the politics of the autistic performer on stage from an employment context as well as a theatrical one. These performances highlight how problematic rhetorical approaches to autism impact policy and legislation for autistic people, and how quirky dramaturgy can create more relaxed flexible employment support. Binchy and Selwyn's work shows how giving greater agency to autistic artists to make work that is both reflective of their experiences and accessible to their audiences might not only neuroqueer neuronormative rhetoric, but also encourage more autistic and disabled individuals to engage with the arts either as a regular theatregoer or as a professional. Within this chapter, any reports or legislation that refer to disability as per the Equality Act 2010, also encompasses autistic people,

[192] Access All Areas, '#binariesbegone', *production*, www.accessallareastheatre.org, https://accessallareastheatre.org/production/binariesbegone/ [Accessed 13/2/23].

because as Janine Booth writes, 'The Government Equalities Office (GEO) lists 'autistic spectrum disorders' as an example of impairment from which disability may arise.'[193]

Relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness are important for the work of Binchy and Selwyn, who work to create the [dis]comfort present within their work. The features of quirky dramaturgical practices help artists in creating pieces of performance, which interrogate neuronormative ideas of functionality. Binchy's persona of 'The Baby' in *MADHOUSE* and Selwyn's persona of Sylvie in *#Binariesbegone* are perfect manifestations of the ways in which quirky dramaturgy can neuroqueer perceptions around autistic cognition, gender and sexuality. These personas also speak more broadly of the body of work produced by Binchy and Selwyn that constructs for us a more comprehensive look at what an autistic artist's methodology looks like and how it is situated in the contemporary employment environment for autistic people within the arts sector. Quirky dramaturgy plays an important role in this employment policy realignment as artists manifest [dis]comforting satirical representations of neuronormative and heteronormative rhetorical approaches to autism. The features of quirky dramaturgical practices creates [dis]comforting futures, or rather futures that relaxedness, flexibility, and neuroqueerness manifest, which shows neurodivergent worlds that have emancipated themselves from realities that situate autism as undesirable or disruptive.

Resultantly, quirky dramaturgical practices can be used by autistic artists to educate audiences on the lived experiences of autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy's use by artists extends beyond the making of the work, but also encompass the support networks and assistance an artist might need in navigating the neurotypical world, for instance helping autistic artists with funding applications for performance projects. Quirky dramaturgy is built upon the foundational tenents of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness, which when used in an autistic performance practice

[193]Janine Booth, *Autism Equality in the Workplace: Removing Barriers and Challenging Discrimination* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016) p.101.

creates[dis]comfort, which imagines new futures by asking how we might actively create better employment opportunities for autistic people within the arts. In doing so, we can use these performance making strategies beyond the theatre in order to challenge neuronormative and ableist practices and begin to think about employment issues for autistic people. Through quirky dramaturgy's relationship with the artist, we begin to understand the issues of othering and the struggles which autistic people face in the navigation of the neurotypical world. From here we begin to see that fundamentally the work of the artist within quirky dramaturgical practices, as will be shown with Binchy and Selwyn, is important in articulating and educating the tensions which autistic people face in regards to the neuronormative rhetoric of autism, but also can be used as an important means of self-advocacy and change in seeking reform both within the arts sector and within government legislation

4.1: [Dis]comfort and Audience Estrangement

[Dis]comfort is an important part of the ways in which an artist uses the features of quirky dramaturgy to devise and stage work using their own lived experiences. Understanding specifically why [Dis]comfort happens as a result of these features is important in underscoring the practices of Binchy and Selwyn and how artists employ this quirky dramaturgical practice. [Dis]comfort is about the awareness of something not quite fitting. To be comfortable as Sara Ahmed puts it:

> is a feeling that tends not to be consciously felt […] Instead, you sink. When you don't sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as a world that is generated in a specific way.[194]

Ahmed describes comfort as a form of relaxedness, a natural unconscious response or feeling that allows someone to disconnect, to feel their body and mind at ease and unaffected by the stresses

[194] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Michigan: Duke University Press, 2006) p.154.

and anxieties of the world. Specifically, within a quirky dramaturgical context, this means gaining that sense of safety and support, and being comfortable being autistic without fear or repercussion for failing to adhere to neuronormative rhetoric. Comfort brings a stillness that allows one to live in the moment. In comparison, Ahmed writes that:

> Discomfort, in other words, allows things to move. Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort; of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground.[195]

> Therefore, discomfort can be viewed as a foil to comfort, as it is about movement and transition in contrast to sameness and order. It is about taking the neuronormative logics of an environment and situation, and responding flexibly to the situation to make it relaxed while neuroqueering neuronormative rhetoric. Therefore, when a performance takes the features of quirky dramaturgy and applies a sense of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness that aims to comfort autistic people and discomfort neurotypicals, [dis]comfort is created.

As an autistic person, it is the struggles to navigate a neurotypical world that often becomes a source of [dis]comfort. What is comfortable and relaxed for one set of people is not the same for another. As a child, firework displays were always a great cause of anxiety and shock. After one such display, I was so terrified I ran away and hid, my body shaking as I became overwhelmed by the sensory overload. What for some is a fun and enjoyable time watching a fireworks display, is for myself a deeply discomforting and terrifying experience. As Ahmed puts it; 'You can feel the categories that you fail to inhabit: they are sources of discomfort.'[196] There is an inherent discomfort in trying to navigate the neurotypical world while autistic. There is a [dis]comfort in those stakes of failing to pass, in the inherent tensions one might face in feeling that they do not belong. This sentiment is very much the case for myself with fireworks. I failed to inhabit that space, it terrified

[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.

and overwhelmed me, and it made me genuinely fearful for my life. The [dis]comfort on display by Binchy and Selwyn, as we will see throughout this chapter, is a quirky dramaturgical approach to this autistic [dis]comfort of navigating the world by instead inhabiting spaces, worlds or interactions with characters that are designed to be discomforting to neurotypical ways of seeing the world. This involves having the artists invert the power dynamics which autistic people face when trying to access spaces or places. It is about making work that is relaxed for autistic people and making neurotypical people feel that same sense of discomfort which many autistic people carry with them on a daily basis when navigating the neurotypical world. [Dis]comfort within autistic experiences, lies in the out of sync feeling of the world we inhabit, things feeling just not quite right. In inverting this dynamic and making relaxed, flexible, neuroqueer work that makes autistic people comfortable but makes neurotypicals uncomfortable, we can help them understand just a small bit of the daily struggle we go through. The lived experiences and means of expressing autism become dramaturgically speaking the text from which the autistic artist performs their work.

Therefore, when an autistic artist uses quirky dramaturgy and the features of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness, they create a sense of estrangement. Silvija Jestrovic, writing on the historical use of estrangement in twentieth century avant-garde art, believes that 'The art of estrangement strove to change aesthetic conventions to correspond to a reality marked by images of trenches on the one side and dreams of a new society on the other'.[197] Estrangement comes to be a form of resisting the Aristotelian idea of art imitating life, instead situating the social reality as mimetic of the infinite creative potentiality of art. As the twentieth century saw art used as an effective propaganda tool to elevate the social realities of autocratic dictatorships such as Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR, estrangement came to become more and more a tool within avant-garde movements that challenged state power and imagined new futures or worlds. From a theatrical framework, Brecht's Verfremdungseffectkt is one such use of estrangement that within

[197] Silvija Jestrovic, *Theatre of Estrangement: Theory, Practice, Ideology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) p.11.

performance proposed a different approach outside of the more traditional naturalist modes of performance. Non and Nick Worrall write that:

> the Verfremdungseffectkt is Brecht's means of controlling the audience's response so that they do not lose themselves emotionally in the action but are forced into critical thinking and awareness. The effect is partly achieved by the author's text itself, partly through the director's handling of the text and partly through the actor's attitudes to what they are doing."[198]

The fundamental approach of Brecht's Verfremdungseffectkt is a reframing of the ways in which performance seeks to engage with their audiences. This reframing comes through asserting that audiences become critical thinkers within the live theatrical event, dissecting and unravelling questions and ideas raised through the action they are witnessing on stage. This is not an entire removal of emotional investment, indeed ideas presented within theatre can stir emotions within us that invest us in the ideas and issues being raised. This means for the Worralls, for an actor within a Brechtian performance their job 'is to understand and communicate, not to empathise and be transformed.'[199] This means that for the performer, their role is framed more around critical discourse and articulating and informing issues through their individual performances of a role. The actor's role according to a Brechtian understanding of theatrical estrangement is to be conscious of the cultural, historical, political and social conditions that inform the performance and the performer, and being the vehicle through which they might communicate the dramaturgical intent to an audience.

It is for this reason that it is important to underscore that while quirky dramaturgy is not Brechtian, it is conscious of the broader understandings and theories which artists and scholars have formulated in order to understand how performance should be constructed and experienced. Quirky dramaturgy's relationship with the artist operates as a means of imagining neurodivergent futures

[198] Nick Worrall and Non Worrall, 'Commentary' , Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera,* Trans. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013) pp.xxiv-lxxxvii (p.xxxviii).
[199] Worrall, 'Commentary', pp.xxiv-lxxxvii (p.xl).

and worlds that exist beyond the social realities which we live within. The purpose of this is to create performance worlds that are reflective of the autistic lived experiences that are accessible and made with autistic perceptions of the world in mind. For autistic artists, mimetic theatre is not a productive or useful way of thinking about making work and engaging with performances for several reasons. The first is the notion of reproducing the neuronormative world which autistic people exist within, which does little beyond create and construct the same sort of problematic representations of autistic people that already exist within the arts (as is the case with *All in a Row* in Chapter 2 or theory of mind in Chapter 3). Secondly, mimetic portrayals of autism that simply reproduce the autistic experience, have the high probability of simply becoming pity porn. Similarly, an autistic theatregoer would very likely not want to invest in a performance about autism that is reflective of the oppressive neuronormative rhetoric they have to navigate on a daily basis without challenging or tearing down those ableist rhetorical approaches. So many romanticised and poorly thought-out pieces of work about autism exist within the arts that do little to truly make autistic people feel as if their experiences are being represented and the issues which they face are being tackled. [Dis]comfort being created by quirky dramaturgy and its features estranges audiences by creating strange new worlds and spaces where the laws and rules of neuronormative society do not apply or function. Quirky dramaturgy showcases how the world can be for autistic people and the advocacy and actions that can lead us there. It can also be used to construct dark dystopian futures that focus on the systems of oppression that autistic people might face throughout their lives, and showcase the dangerous end results of those oppressive approaches. This understanding of the ways in which autistic artists use quirky dramaturgy when building the world of their performances constructs both a critical and educational framework to help inform neurotypical audiences on how to be allies while giving autistic audiences that voice and presence that creatively is distinctly theirs.

[Dis]comfort is generated by drawing on the features of quirky dramaturgy as a means for autistic artists to manifest and forge characters and worlds outside of neuronormative rhetorical approaches to their identities. The struggle to navigate a world that does not understand your

perception of the world and often actively attempts to erase your existence means [dis]comfort is a fundamentally autobiographical approach wherein autistic artists can explain and educate on their lived experiences. This is imperative in light of the more stereotyped and problematic portrayals of autistic people. This means that dramaturgy is both educating and [dis]comforting the neurotypical audience members making them understand the issues we face and the breaking down of stereotypes. But is it also comforting for the autistic audience member to be a theatregoer at a performance that acknowledges and understands their existence and issues? Or to see an autistic performer evokes a sense of agency, self-advocacy and visibility afforded to the autistic artist? Such performance approaches to audiences and engagement by the artist only solidify the persistent employment issues which we face. Quirky dramaturgy presents solutions through creating these imagined futures and critiquing the failings within UK society to create adequate support. The arts are an important part of autistic advocacy and have been at the front of the growth of autism rights movements led by autistic people for autistic people. The arts sector constructs the image of inclusiveness and progressive values, and as such they should be held to a higher standard to practice what they preach and create access and support for autistic and learning-disabled people to more readily find creative industries jobs.

4.2: Cian Binchy and Growing Sideways

Theatre artist and autistic arts advocate Cian Binchy creates work that is reflective of his experiences as an autistic man, examining autism, masculinity and infantilisation. Binchy has performed nationally and internationally alongside the support of learning-disabled theatre group Access All Areas, and has also been an autism consultant for a number of mainstream theatrical productions, most notably the National Theatre's 2012 production of *The Curious Incident of The Dog in the Night-Time*. *MADHOUSE re:exit* is a collaborative project amongst many different learning-disabled artists who came together alongside Access All Areas to create a work that is reflective of their experiences. Access All Areas writes that the show is 'Inspired by a refusal to be silent, and a history of being

ignored, five learning disabled artists take us on a wondrous adventure underground'[200] Drawing upon ableist and neuronormative rhetoric, *MADHOUSE*, as Access All Areas continues, 'has built on the legacy of Mabel Cooper, a resident of a long-stay hospital for people with learning disabilities, who pressed the button that blew up one of the last of these institutions in the UK.' [201]Each persona is not only reflective of each artists' experiences in regards to how they are viewed, but reflective of their performance practices. For Binchy, his man baby persona had been performed and developed through cabaret and club performances, and is a perfect distillation of the playfully chaotic and comic approach which Binchy takes in trying to use his performances to educate about autism. Binchy's man baby persona manifested in *MADHOUSE* is a tongue in cheek situating of the neuronormative dialogues that have long since infantilised and relegated autistic voices. While one's natural response under such rhetorical understandings of the autistic individual would tempt us to play against stereotypes to situate autistic experiences as more than reductive stereotypes, Binchy plays into it instead. Binchy uses his lived experiences of being autistic to stage and make visible the autistic actor (In stark contrast to problematic shows like *All in a Row* in Chapter 2).

The lived experiences of being autistic offers a rich text through which to dramaturgically configure performance and educate and make visible the everyday challenges and issues that we face. The aim is primarily one of [dis]comfort because, as an autistic person seeing Binchy dressed as a baby is distinctly unnerving, and brings up people within my own life who have sought to infantilise me or my ability to be 'normal'. The infantilising of autistic people is a worrying trend that speaks of the neuronormative biases which people still have, be it conscious or unconscious. Binchy engages with participation-based modes of performing which we have seen in previous work by Vijay Patel and Oily Cart in Chapter 3, but also blends moments of satire alongside the manifestation of a performance persona which evokes a distinct [dis]comfort from not understanding the reality

[200] Access All Areas, 'MADHOUSE RE:EXIT', *What's On*, *shoreditchtownhall.com*. https://shoreditchtownhall.com/whats-on/madhouse [Accessed 4/4/2019].
[201] Ibid.

brought forth. Representations of autism are framed in neuronormative frameworks as overcoming adversity. These are stories that either reinforce their otherness or tell of their effective integration into neuronormative society. And when these sorts of roles are often played by actors who do not openly make known their own autistic subjectivity, autistic actors find themselves type casted or erased entirely. This means that, when an autistic actor takes a quirky dramaturgical approach in contrast to mainstream autistic portrayals in performance, it stands out, it makes us [dis]comforted.

Quirky dramaturgy is underscored by the focus on relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness. A performance maker that is engaging with a quirky dramaturgical practice understands that by creating their own performance reality and persona within that world, they present themselves as the experts of exclusive knowledge to the ways in which that world operates. The aim is to create [dis]comfort through making performances relaxed, inclusive and disruptive of neuronormative rhetoric, which the dystopian satirical character of Binchy's baby persona achieves. The autistic artist aims to invert the neurological power dynamics that shape how autistic people must navigate the world. Autistic people are always adapting and catering for neurotypical people and neurotypical sensibilities. They must learn the way in which the neurotypical world works to survive. The creation of their own worlds distinct from the social reality we live within emphasises a dissonance in the ways in which we engage with autistic people, and the ways in which autistic artists navigate the industry. Personas and satire become core elements of the ways in which these performance worlds are created and operate as the artist goes about generating [dis]comforting forces.

Binchy's baby persona within *MADHOUSE* is one of a number of articulations of disabled identities that occur during the immersive experience which the show provides. DJ Hassen takes on the role of the bird, Dayo Emmanuel as The Eater, and Imogen Roberts as The Goddess. Audiences are guided along the 'facility' the performance exists within by other patients as they enter each separate room. The performance itself operates under the standard spatial and audience dramatical

approaches of quirky dramaturgy, using participatory elements and making the performance environment relaxed. The audience starts in a waiting room, surrounded by posters with slogans such as 'The revolution is already here', and are then guided into a room dubbed 'The Cabinet of Curiosities'. Framed like a Victorian freakshow, a projection of a man who was a former patient at Paradise Fields explains his time at the facility, and lays out the rules of the performance, and that audience members should follow people called patient 36, who serve as the guides for audiences throughout the performance if they get lost or overstimulated and need to leave. From here the audience are guided through each room and come into contact one by one with the Bird, Eater, Goddess and 'The Baby'. Binchy's persona of the baby takes the centre of this analysis through its framing of autism and its relational experiences with oppressive neuronormative rhetoric. Binchy's baby is the physical manifestation of both his advocacy for autistic actors within the arts sector and his wider artistic practice – examining the ways in which neuronormative misconceptions have framed autistic identities.

Within the room with Binchy as the baby, audience members are asked to build a cot, change his nappy and read him a bed time story. Audience members are made to infantilise Binchy as he stands dressed in a pink baby costume with a pacifier and milk bottle. The image of an autistic person assuming the role of a baby is a powerful image. Neuroqueering ableist rhetoric about autism, Binchy through participation places audiences in the [dis]comforting position of becoming active agents in his oppression within Paradise Fields. Quirky dramaturgy is a powerful performance strategy for the autistic artist because it presents a neuroqueer retort to the way that the autistic performer is expected to perform. For Binchy, the autistic actor often has to play to type, invoking and playing into stereotypes, or performing the role of the autistic. Binchy's persona is a manifestation of this point, of the navigation of employment many autistic people face. For Binchy and the rest of the cast of *MADHOUSE*, sharp satirical personas are reflective of ableist perceptions of their disabilities and are a way of challenging the heteronormative hierarchies of neoliberal

society that ascribe a certain degree of social, cultural and political capital to different groups. Maurice Charney writes:

> Comic convention postulates a society that is rigidly hierarchal. By the laws of decorum, carefully formulated by such Roman Rhetoricians as Cicero and Quintilian, different social classes have their prescribed styles, both of manners and of speech.[202]

Charney argues that comic practices view different groups as having set characteristics that make and define them. This becomes the bedrock of stereotypes that are often used within comedic contexts for satirical effect, such as the mocking of a prominent public figure, but which could also be used to make degrading jokes about the other. This means that, as Andrew Stott describes, 'Watching a parade of stereotypes, therefore, affords the comfort of confirming an audience's prejudices.'[203] If stereotypes can be seen as a form of comfort, a confirming of one's prejudices and world view, then we might view the opposite to be true when Binchy embodies the role of a baby. It is [dis]comforting to watch an autistic man embody those ableist readings of his identity. Binchy makes the audience participants in his 'degradation'. There is a playful satirical bite in making audiences [dis]comforted through confrontation with their own prejudices, as they are made to be participants. Binchy uses quirky dramaturgical practices to neuroqueer the role of the autistic artist by embodying to the extreme these grotesque and offensive stereotypes. Quirky dramaturgy is playful and delights in the chaos of disrupting the ways in which audiences might understand the world to operate. Artists engaging with quirky dramaturgy neuroqueer neuronormative understanding of the world, instead invoking ideas of physical manifestation of atypicality through the body of the autistic artist. If we see stereotypes as trying to comfort and affirm prejudiced knowledge, quirky performances are the satirical embodiment of those stereotypes, to stir [dis]comfort through atypicality.

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[202] Maurice Charnery, Quoted in, Andrew Stott*, Comedy: The New Critical Idiom,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) pp.43-44.
[203] Stott, p.44

MADHOUSE presents a dystopian dysfunctional reality that emphasises exclusionary practices towards disabled people. Speaking at the Awkward Bastards 2 Conference at the MAC in 2017, Binchy said 'I'm 26 years old, I should be leading an adult life. Instead, I am this giant kid falling down this wishing well.'[204] This issue for Binchy is then carefully constructed within *MADHOUSE's* world to underscore the harmful real-life implication and social stakes involved in infantilising autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy uses the worlds and environments it creates to manifest and construct personas that are neuroqueer disruptions of these harmful rhetorics. The performative purpose for the artist in such a quirky dramaturgical approach involves foregrounding the autistic subjectivity of the performance maker. The agency of the autistic performance maker within the performance event and their lived experience is just as imperative as that of the audience for whom the performance is being made. Manifestations of personas place a twofold emphasis on the visibility of the autistic artist and the neuroqueering of the neuronormative rhetoric that has aimed to be exclusionary towards them. Atypicality manifested, the strange alien entities that stand before us at a quirky performance are [dis]comforting, disconcerting, hostile to neuronormative sensibilities. These personas act as 'experts' or embodied bases of power within the world, guiding us. *MADHOUSE* has its patients literally fulfil this function as guides within the performance.

Binchy's performance practice extends beyond this moment within *MADHOUSE*, but his body of work portrays an artist concerned with the ways in which stereotypes of autism are made, and how as an autistic performance maker he can neuroqueer this neuronormative rhetoric. This theme is a constant throughout Binchy's practice, and can also be seen in his 2017 performance *Misfit Analysis* at the Colchester Arts Centre. Similar to Binchy's work within *MADHOUSE*, *Misfit Analysis* is an exploration of the ways in which performance practice and autistic subjectivity intersect. *Misfit Analysis* is a rejection of neuronormative rhetorical approaches to autism, and the

[204] Cian Binchy, Quoted in, DASH, *Awkward Bastards 2 - Panel Two, Pasts and Futures, Nick Llewellyn & Cian Binchy*, Online Video Recording, www.youtube.com , https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQpa7XHGyBg (May 5, 2017) [Accessed 20/4/2019]

structure of the show itself is a reflection of this point. Binchy has 12 scenes, each articulating a key part of the struggle against societal perceptions as he makes sense of the world around him. Each scene takes its own performative form: poetry, acting, audience participation via a gameshow. The performance is relaxed, and through its physical and digital access for autistic audiences, Binchy situates the ways in which his practice is framed within the wider discussions around performance access for autistic audiences, placing to the forefront the fundamental principle as an autistic performer that work should emphasise their neurodivergent subjectivity. This means creating authentic representations of autistic experiences that are not being articulated through the role of an actor who has not made known their subjectivity as an autistic person. However, quirky dramaturgy is not saying that all work must be defined by one's autism, as to do so would place us within the same groups who view our autism as a tokenistic trait to actuate performative acts of 'solidarity'. Within a quirky dramaturgy, it is the role of the artist to instead imagine alternative modes of engaging with audiences that speak to challenging neuronormative and heteronormative frameworks of identity and artistic expression. To create work that provides spaces for those who feel excluded and deemed undesirable. Quirky dramaturgical methodologies such as Binchy's uses the[dis]comfort one might experience in the satirical representations of normative and oppressive frameworks, using this to champion and advocate instead for all things deemed atypical. Resultantly, personas become an effective dramaturgical strategy within the devising of the performance, drawing attention to the challenges that autistic people face from neuronormative rhetoric.

Binchy embodies the perceptions of autistic people as children stuck in adult bodies, implicating problematic neuronormative rhetoric on autistic behavioural development and the treatment and framing of autistic people within workspaces. The autistic adult is in many contexts seen more as a child than a typical adult, being framed as a disruptive agent that has not fully 'grown up' and is therefore incapable of being viewed as a 'functional' member of society. I speak here specifically of issues around employment, gender, sexuality, and dealing with one's finances. While autistic people indeed might struggle with this aspect of life to varying degrees contextual to their

own ‘functionality’, it is problematic to assume that they are not ‘grown up’ enough as opposed to approaching these things with a sideways perspective. Kathryn Bond Stockton defines and explores this concept of growing sideways by examining the spectrum of different approaches to growing up and developing that might not adhere to a normative idea of childhood development. This is important because Binchy’s baby persona is the satirical embodiment of these autistic stereotypes, which provides a way of expressing and arguing for ways of growing sideways.

Kathryn Bond Stockton writes that ‘The child who by reigning cultural definitions can’t “grow up” grows to the side of cultural ideas.’[205] This core principle of growing sideways is indicative of the relationship which rhetorical approaches to autism have had on the autistic person themself. And with Binchy, we see a growing sideways of the manner in which people envision autistic cognition in relation to neuronormative rhetorical approaches to the world. Audiences become caregivers to an autistic man framed as incapable of looking after himself as a result of this view of him as a man baby. The implication is that he has never cognitively developed, and is therefore unable physically and cognitively to perform simple tasks because he has not undergone ‘proper’ childhood development.

Binchy and the world of *MADHOUSE* signals some impending revolution upon this restrictive space of medical incarnation of the other. Alongside the [dis]comforting image of being presented with a grown man being viewed and embodied as a baby, and the audience being made complicit agents in that infantilising of an autistic individual, growing sideways comes to be a way to challenge the ways in which we see growing up. A very binary approach to childhood development leads to the problematic routes of ‘functionality’ and who is and is not ‘grown up’ that does not account for the factors of race, gender, sexuality, disability and neurology that inform the ways in which we might develop. Growing sideways for Bond Stockton refers ‘to something related but not reducible to the

[205]Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in The Twentieth Century* (Michigan: Duke University Press, 2009) p.13.

death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive'[206] This approach is important in relation to the understanding that the ways in which one might grow sideways are rooted in the pleasures one might find in the ephemera of life. This approach promotes and celebrates an out of sync element that is encouraging the exploration of identities that might not be normative. Bond Stockton goes on to develops these ideas, writing that:

> Kids may feel least comfortable coming out to peers, at least when they are children – or so it has seemed until recent times. But this feeling of fearful self-disclosure may concern any child who feels out of sync with the children around her or feels repelled by the future being mapped out for her. She may prefer growing sideways in relations that are not standard connections to peers in the act of growing up.[207]

This feeling of being out of sync with those one grows up around and fear of identifying and making known to others their otherness is a key motivator in social masking for autistic people, who find there to be social stakes in being revealed to be autistic and resultantly ostracised by their peers.. Speaking from the experiences of going through the UK education system as a young autistic trying to navigate my identity around my school peers, I felt a distinct sense of fear in being mocked, infantilised and ostracised entirely for being autistic and different. The feeling of being out of sync of 'fearful self-disclosure' led to me for my childhood and teenage years, being a closeted self-hating autistic who would go to any lengths to pass and blend in, much to the detriment of my mental health and wellbeing. This feeling I'm sure is relatable to many other autistic people. I wish when I was growing up that there was a more encouraging or open way of speaking of alternative ways of growing up as autistic that does not make us autistics immediately feel like we are treading the binaries of being seen as either 'normal' or 'abnormal'.

[206]Ibid., p.13.
[207] Ibid., p.52.

Theatre and performing provided a safe space and a means of expression that the real world could not adequately provide, and provided for me personally a means to grow sideways by understanding the world and people through the works of Shakespeare, Miller and Brecht. Quirky dramaturgy can be thought of as closet opening letting autistic people feel proud and not to feel ashamed of who they are or how they see the world. This is important to articulate for me personally but also within the context of Binchy's work because performance is a means of growing sideways. Bond Stockton writes that 'children should approach all things adult with caution and in ways that guarantee their distance from adulthood.'[208] Binchy does exactly this with his baby persona. Herein he is both a horrifying satire of autistic infantilization and the distancing of adulthood, and the expectations of how one should grow up. It is [dis]comforting to see Binchy exist within *MADHOUSE* as this baby, not just because of the obvious statement being made about how he feels people view him, but also because of how autism can be something transgressive. The placement of the audience as caregivers, created by placing us within a deeply [dis]comforting power dynamic, places at the forefront the ethics of parental relationships to their autistic children. Bond Stockton articulates this point, writing that:

> In many respects, the adults who surround the managed child – supremely its parents – are the ones who hold on behalf of the child the visions of approach, since children, while approaching, are thought unable to see these visions.[209]

Bond Stockton articulates the notion that distance to childhood and adulthood is managed by the parent, taking decisions on distance and 'growing up' on behalf of the child. Audience members take on this role of care giver within *MADHOUSE*, and in the process of giving 'care' to Binchy feeding him, putting him to bed we come to be the ones who dictate his distance between adulthood and childhood. This approach underscores the ways in which quirky dramaturgy uses a

[208] Ibid., p.90.
[209] Ibid.,pp.90-91.

flexible approach to access and care of autistic artists and audiences that is in contrast to the more monolithic ideas of access and support which institutions apply to people autistic people. Binchy applies that dynamic in his satire and attack of those neuronormative rhetorical approaches to autism and growing up. There is a 'growing sideways' approach adopted by Binchy that says something about how not just autistic people are infantilised, but how autistic actors are viewed, framed and cast within the arts. The adult playing the child trapped within the adult. This 'growing sideways' approach is indicative of the ways in which autistic people are often framed within the creative industries, with no flexibility or diversity in roles. Quirky dramaturgy's impact upon autistic artists allows for us to have a performance practice that addresses employment issues within the arts for autistic people. This is specifically articulated in regards to Binchy, as his work intersects with his advocacy for autistic performance makers and the employment of more autistic actors within the theatre. This is an intersecting and interlocking component of Binchy's man baby persona and growing sideways because of the often-cited ethical concerns that are framed as the reason why an autistic actor might not get a role. This is a poignant point of analysis in regards to autistic actors, autistic roles and autistic subjectivity.

Tom Shakespeare emphasises how curative languages creates dangerous and ableist characterisations about autistic people, writing that:

> Medical model thinking is enshrined in the liberal term "people with disabilities," and in approaches that seek to count the numbers of people with impairment, or to reduce the complex problems of disabled people to issues of medical prevention, cure or rehabilitation.[210]

Shakespeare argues that attempts to codify languages of disability and pathologically define disability and any potential impairment are intertwined. However, such a heavy-handed approach fails to take into account the experiences of the individual, and the spectrum they exist on.

[210] Tom Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', *The Disability Studies Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Lenard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010) p.199.

Specifically, in regards to autism, misconceptions about unhealthy cultural stereotypes and neuronormative research methodologies (such as theory of mind as discussed in Chapter 3), often fail to understand the broader spectrum which autistic people exist upon. This approach to autism research has left outdated, gendered diagnostic frameworks that have resulted in women being misdiagnosed. This approach has also impacted access policy making, particularly around relaxed performances and the forms of access a show might choose to take. Effective and diverse access and support nationwide could be better implemented to allow autistic artists the assistance they might need without belittling or infantilising them. The infantilization of autism and autistic people, situates autistic access in the arts as being merged somewhat with children's theatre (as I have discussed in Chapter 2), which emphasises the ways in which neuronormative discourses view autistic people and their issues as infantile.

4.3: Quirky Performance Making and Autistic Arts Employment

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2020, Binchy positions his own relationship with arts employment as an autistic person and giving visibility to his work, stating, '"I'm on universal credit – don't get me started on that, it's been a nightmare. It is so complicated and it's hurting a lot of people […] We all have different talents and what you do will be unique." '[211] Binchy raises the issues of navigating the employment landscape as an autistic artist, more so when employment and welfare support for disabled people within the UK puts them at a distinct disadvantage. Binchy's work articulates autistic visibility through the self-analysing of his own role as an autistic performance maker, more so one creating and producing their own work, and how this intersects with how people perceive him and his autism. Although one might see there to be a tonal shift in direction within the arts sector in terms of autistic employability, the long-term results of this shift are yet to be determined. Policy making could indeed shift towards more robust employability

[211] Cian Binchy, Quoted in, Saba Salman, 'Cian Binchy: 'Neurodiverse Performers Need to Make a Living Too', *The Guardian, Society* (10th March, 2020) https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/10/cian-binchy-neurodiverse-performers-need-make-living-disability-curious-incident [Accessed 11/9/2020].

opportunities for autistic theatre workers, or these new policies could likewise find themselves in the same stagnant state of UK relaxed performance policy making. Disabled people make 6% of the arts workforce, in contrast to the 21% national average of disability employment.[212] This is also in contrast to 61% non-disabled workforce, with 25% choosing not to disclose.[213] These statistics showcase the sector is grossly below the national average and highlights the systemic issues for disabled people seeking employment within the arts, despite the introspective look by the sector in regards to access and employment. However, DYCP [Develop Your Creative Practice] successful grant applications for disabled artists sit above the average rate of approval. DYCP grants are accepted at 13% over a 12% average. Between 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 there was a growth of 7% in successful DYCP applications for disabled artists.[214] During this same period however National Lottery Project Grants remained the same at 41%, which is below the average rate of approval at 43% for 2018/2019 and 44% for 2019/2020.[215] This initial data would seem to suggest that disabled artists feel more encouraged to self-produce their own work and develop their practice, but likewise also underscore a proportional below average approval rates for National Lottery funding. There is a tension that arises when autistic artists face themselves against the theatre institutions that want to use their labour to 'authenticate' their neuronormative portrayals of autism within their productions. Binchy worked as an autism consultant for the National Theatre's Production of *The Curious Incident of The Dog in The Night Time*, and speaks of the time in an interview with *The Independent* in 2015 saying that, '"I enjoyed the experience and they all seem very nice […] But it's very hard to teach how to be autistic to someone."'[216] There is an inherent importance for autistic people within the arts to effectively prescribe their own experiences without others taking roles and

[212] Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and The Creative Case* (Manchester: Arts Council, 2019) p.11.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Cian Binchy, Quoted In, Nick Clark, 'We Need Autistic Actors Playing Autistic Roles on Stage, Says Curious Incident Adviser', *The Independent, Culture, Theatre and Dance, News (13th August, 2015)* https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/we-need-autistic-actors-playing-autistic-roles-on-stage-says-curious-incident-adviser-10454728.html [Accessed 7/6/2020]

opportunities that would benefit from an autistic performer. Regarding this issue, we might likewise look back at *All in a Row*, and the decision to situate an autistic body on stage as a puppet as opposed to employing an autistic actor.

The 2019 study from the Office of National Statistics into disabled employability in the UK lays out 5 core pieces of statistical data which help to contextualise arts employability within the wider national data on disabled people within the workplace. The study found that:

- Between 2013 and 2019, the disability employment gap has reduced; with the latest data showing roughly half of disabled people were in employment (53.2%) compared with just over four out of five non-disabled people (81.8%) (Labour Force Survey, LFS).
- The employment gap was larger for disabled men than disabled women, with a 31.7 percentage point difference between disabled and non-disabled men, compared with a 25.0 percentage point difference for women; this was driven by the higher employment rate for non-disabled men (LFS, 2019).
- Working disabled men were more likely to be self-employed (20.6%) than non-disabled men (17.5%); no significant difference was seen between disabled and non-disabled women (Annual Population Survey, APS, 2019).
- Working disabled people were more likely to work part-time than non-disabled people, with 34.1% of disabled people working part-time in comparison with 23.1% of non-disabled people (APS, 2019).
- The employment rate for disabled people with severe or specific learning difficulties was the lowest rate of any impairment (17.6%, APS, 2019).[217]

[217] Office of National Statistics, *Disability and employment, UK: 2019: Employment Outcomes for Disabled Adults, with Analysis by Age, Sex, Impairment Type, Country and Working Patterns using Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Population Survey (APS) Data. (London: Office of National Statistics, 2nd December, 2019)* p.5.

These issues around the autistic performer are manifestations of those broader institutional tensions around access that have long been oppressive structures for autistic people and many other disabled and neurodivergent people. Eleanor Buckley, Elizabeth Pellicano and Anna Remington point out that;

> to address issues of human rights and workplace productivity for those with autism, there needs to be greater understanding of the importance of the person-environment fit, as well as policies and practices that reflect and address these issues.[218]

Key to allowing accessible work spaces that allow autistic people to flourish is to understand the interpersonal relationships forged alongside the kinaesthetic relationships that autistic people have with environments. Relaxed performance policies and participatory models of performance that make up engagement with autistic audiences at present emphasise and articulate this point, but volume and availability to all autistic people is fundamentally narrow. Translating these approaches into how theatres might seek to employ autistic people, specifically within this context in relation to performing, there is still a distinct feeling that despite attempts of outreach, the autistic performers are not effectively represented, despite a clear improvement in the performance opportunities for autistic and learning-disabled people. *All in a Row* for instance is a gross example of objects being used to replace autistic bodies on stage. At the moment of writing this, and the precarious situation the arts faces in a post-COVID-19 world and the far-reaching financial strains being placed upon arts organisations, it is hard to paint a clear image going forward of the future employability of autistic performance makers. Binchy believes that:

> The problem is that people often think that the only kind of theatre that neurodiverse people can do is a tiny performance in a church hall … people see it and say 'Ah, that's nice they're doing well". But we don't just want to get out of the house – we want a purpose in life and we need to

[218]Elenaor Buckley, Elizabeth Pellicano and Anna Remington, '" The Real Thing I Struggle with is Other People's Perceptions": The Experiences of Autistic Performing Arts Professionals and Attitudes of Performing Arts Employers in the UK', *The Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, Vol.51 (April, 2020) pp.45-59 (p.56).

> earn money just like anyone else. When I earn money, I can make a better living for myself, I'm doing something I love and it's being taken seriously.[219]

Binchy's work in particular always feels to be articulating issues around the position of the autistic artist within a neuronormative arts sector, with Binchy trying to reconcile the issues the arts sector has, while also finding their place within it, all the while working out how other autistic people can come together to make work and make their voices be heard. Buckley Pellicano, and Remington emphasises this point arguing that: 'In broader autism employment research, there is consensus that many autistic adults face often-substantial challenges in the workplace, mostly related to interactions with, or attitudes of, employers.'[220]

These challenges are presented by a 2022 report by the Department of Work and Pensions, which reveal the failings of employers to support neurodiverse people. The report found that there was growth in disabled employment:

> The number of disabled people in employment has increased by 1.5m from 2.9m in Q2 2013 to 4.4m in Q2 2021 (an increase of 53.5%). The number has continued to increase (year-on-year) throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic but at a much slower rate – than seen in previous years.[221]

This means that, as the report develops; 'The number of disabled people in employment is now above pre-pandemic levels. There are 390,000 more disabled people in employment in Q2 2021 than there were in Q2 2019.'[222] Despite the apparent positive growth that these statistics would provide, the work environment and job security for people who are neurodivergent or suffer from neurological conditions fails to provide effective stability. The report discovered that:

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[219] Binchy, Quoted in, 'Cian Binchy: 'Neurodiverse Performers Need to Make a Living Too'.
[220] Buckley, Pellicano, Remington, pp.45-59 (p.45).
[221] Department of Work and Pensions, *Official Statistics: The employment of disabled people 2021*, 4.Measures(London: February, 2022) https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2021/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2021#about-these-statistics [Accessed, 10/3/2022]
[222] Ibid.

> Disabled people whose main health condition is depression, bad nerves or anxiety have one of the highest rates of movements out of work (10.6%) and, also one of the highest rates of movements into work (14.6%). This group is the most likely to change their employment status in any given year. Disabled people with a mental health condition are more likely to move both out of work and into work compared to those with a musculoskeletal condition as their main health condition.[223]

Therefore, despite a higher rate of employment, autistic people are still faced with a unstable employment landscape that means that they might gain and lose employment at a faster rate than the rest of the UK. This data emphasises that while there is growth for autistic people with regards to employment, the level of support and assistance once an autistic person acquires employment is not up to standard, and as such they might find it necessary to leave. This speaks to the lack of focused efforts to create relaxed and flexible environments for autistic people, and a failure to comprehend on the part of policy makers the access and support needs an autistic person might need in order for them to flourish and have a successful career. As a result, Buckley's previous argument that autistic employees find challenges within the workplace via the interactions and engagements with their employers holds significant weight.

Quirky dramaturgy positions the ways in which artists can effectively create flexible and relaxed access based upon lived experience within the arts sector for autistic people through creating the autistic futures within performances such as Binchy's. The manifestation of the atypical futures staged within the theatrical event can be seen as articulations and ways of navigating the future possibilities for the autistic individual on and off stage, allowing dialogues and developments of practices and challenges to neuronormative rhetoric and the development of a network of artists that support and facilitate one another in the development of work that promotes autistic and other neurodivergent causes. Likewise, employment opportunities should not be used as a means of

[223] Department of Work and Pensions, 8. Flows

attempting to integrate or normalise autistic people to become consumed by the homogenous neuronormative frameworks that reduce neurological difference down to a binary idea of human neurology.

4.4: *#BinariesBeGone* and Gender

Xandri Selwyn 's *#BinariesBeGone* continues this concept of access, support and personas through quirky dramaturgy. Selwyn's persona of Sylvie, a tour guide for the dystopian future her performance is set within, details the 50 years that led to the revolution that outlawed gender and any other form of difference. Within the performance, we are visitors to the 'national museum of identity', with Selwyn welcoming us into the theatre. Selwyn and a co performer that helped with ushering in audience members stand opposite one another, black masking tape in hand, and cover over the word 'girl' emblazoned on both their shirts. Acting as a tour guide to the world of the performance, Selwyn explains how 2019 was the end of all social signifiers and the beginning of the revolution. These social signifiers extend beyond just gender, as disability, social economic class, race and religion have all been purged from society in place of a homogenous way of being, behaving and presenting. Selwyn explains they will showcase what people acted and behaved liked before the eradication of identity through the transformation into their persona of Sylvie. However, as Selwyn explains with wonderfully dry wit, due to the cultural stereotypes of the past, this transformation and presentation can only be that of a white, cis, able-bodied woman. Selwyn's assistant comes back on stage and then assists Selwyn in their transformation, as we witness the deconstruction and breakdown of Selwyn, and their manifesting into Sylvie. Selwyn's persona wears an ill-fitting dress and brown wig, make up scribbled across their face, making their lips appear to look like they are almost bleeding, while Sylvie wears a pair of high heels alongside a red handbag. Sylvie explains to us varying oddities about life before the eradication of identity, scoffing at the absurd ways people of the past lived while embodying a grossly homogenous presentation of gender. Sylvie educates us on how tampons, not prosecco, was considered a luxury good, the gender

of items, or how early 20th century cigarette campaigns encouraged women to take up smoking. Sylvie also leads us through a historical presentation of the ways and key moments that led to the revolution, all the while presenting a tongue in cheek satire of how otherness informs contemporary heteronormative societies. Within the world of the performance, Genesis Bowie becomes the first trans person of colour to become prime minister, which leads in 2023 to the censoring of all identities and identity riots up until 2029. With all identities or sense of otherness now erased so everyone can be a homogonous collective, the state can censor and exude control over the general populace. The performance ends with a recorded speech from their president and Selwyn escorting audience member out of the theatre. The performance provides criticism towards those who wish to eradicate identity signifiers such as gender, and the performance likewise challenges the paranoid, hateful and bigoted beliefs about transgender and gender non-conforming people by trans exclusionary radical feminists. Gender is framed by Selwyn as a victim of a patriarchal system that others and restricts rights. The president Genesis Bowie is a perfect satirical presentation of the belief that those of divergent identities, non cis, non-white identities to be exact, will somehow cause the downfall of modern society. As a non-binary person, Selwyn has personal stakes attached to such discourse, and their chaotic amalgamation of different gendered aesthetic trends to create Sylvie with shirts, tights, poorly assembled makeup upon their face, is a manifestation of the intersections between autism and gender. Like Binchy, Selwyn manifests the use of personas within these performance fictions to create the same sort of challenging of normative hierarchies. The abolition of difference within the post revolution world of *#BinariesBeGone* creates a dystopian world where each individual is the 'same' with no distinct identity to allow them to express their individualism. This future erases autistic and queer identities in place of a conformist hierarchal structure that sees difference as a criminal act.

Quirky dramaturgy and its features for Selwyn is used similarly to Binchy, being an articulation of the ways in which an autistic future might manifest from the neurotypical anxieties about autistic bodies and brains. While performance practices for Binchy are rooted in the visibility

of the autistic actor, the act of performing autism as a manifestation of the ways in which he has had to deal with infantilisation and desexualisation, Selwyn instead takes a queer approach to autism and its relationship to gender. Of particular interest in *#Binariesbegone* is the construction on stage of Selwyn's persona of Sylvie. Sylvie's rather frantic and chaotic construction as we witness the transition of Selwyn into Sylvie, a difference from the already present persona of Binchy's baby, highlights the ways autistic people present themselves to neurotypical people by trying to 'pass'. This construction helps, as Sylvie explains to the audience, by accommodating us to the way that things once were as Selwyn begins to embody and perform over the top, bordering on grotesque female stereotypes as a juxtaposition to the world we inhabit. Stott writes that 'Obscene, sexual or taboo humour is predicated on an understanding of the socially tolerable body that its perverts in order to provoke laughter.'[224] This over-the-top manifestation of these gendered traits through the construction and embodiment of Sylvie, makes a tongue in cheek comment on the social tolerability of gendered bodies in relation to non-binary and gender non-conforming people. This is made more potent in the usage of satire through the performance of Sylvie within this future, genderless world, wherein Sylvie would be seen as an obscene relic of an intolerable time. Stott continues: 'The grotesque is a form of exaggerated and ambivalent social commentary produced by the violent clash of opposites, especially those that are comic and terrifying, existing in a state of unresolved tension.'[225] So Sylvie is at once both a clash of two separate spaces in time coming together in opposition with one another, and the manifestation of the tensions which a non-binary autistic might feel when navigating their own brains and identity within a heteronormative society.

Selwyn's performance examines the inflexibility such rigid structures of behaviour and identity have, and how the erasure of those identities places serious risk on anybody who fails to pass. This relates to the interlinked histories of passing that autistic and queer people both have historically and culturally faced to 'fit in' as normative within a heteronormative society. Selwyn

[224] Stott, p.86.
[225] Ibid., p.87.

uses the persona of Sylvie to emphasise the features of quirky dramaturgical practices, inverting and satirising neuronormative rhetoric of 'normality' and curing. The decision to show the construction of the character of Sylvie highlights the ways in which both autistic people and queer people have to navigate these performative rituals in order to 'pass'. More so for a queer autistic, this issue of navigation becomes more complex and loaded as neurology, gender and sexuality intersect and collide. Yergeau emphasises these issues and how they affect female and non-binary autistics, writing that:

> Girls, women, and non-binary-identifying individuals are not only diagnosed later with autism than are cisgender boys, but many fail to be officially diagnosed at all. Autism researchers continually debate whether autism's gendered ratios-ranging from4:1 to 10:1 male to female – are a matter of biology or phallocentric and ciscentric conceptions of developmental disability. Meanwhile, autistic women, as well as non-binary and queer identified autistics, frequently narrate their purported recovery stories as stories of closeting, masking, passing, fakery and self-governance.[226]

Yergeau sets out a number of core issues that intersect between autism and gender in relation to diagnosis and navigation of the neurotypical world which are fundamental to understand the quirky dramaturgical approaches used by Selwyn. Yergeau argues that gendered biases in the diagnostic and treatment-based frameworks of autism have led to cisgendered approaches of viewing autism and other forms of neurodivergence. This has led to female, non-binary and gender non-conforming autistics passing, masking and understanding the world themselves as they become isolated from a system and framework that does not effectively understand or conceptualise their needs.

#Binariesbegone takes these binaries to comical extremes to stir in us a quiet [dis]comfort produced by what we are confronted with. An amalgamation of gendered caricatures are made and

[226] Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism : On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Michigan: Duke University Press, 2018) pp.123-124.

created on-stage as if Selwyn is attempting to pass and mask. The removal of identity groups and binary ways of being and existing in the future world of *#Binariesbegone* is dystopic in its removal of such notions as identity or difference. In the place of these categories, we have a society where everyone is the same in terms of self-expression, and people finding community in those like them. Gone is the wide range of identities and ways in which we can cognitively perceive the world and others, in place of which is established authoritarian control over selfhood and free expression. Autistic people within this future would fear about passing or masking, as they attempt to fit into normative hierarchies that deem them other, because with their very existences being deemed illegal or deviant to society, their lives are in danger if they are discovered to be different from the norm within this dystopia. As such, Selwyn is seeking to draw attention to the heteronormative present that cares little for their experiences as a non-binary autistic by taking exclusionary rhetoric to its extreme conclusion. By presenting a strange and dystopic world that alienates the identities of the audience as they try to navigate the strange world they are within, the intent is to draw attention to the present day issues a non-binary autistic person like Selwyn faces. What Binchy and Selwyn, and indeed all performances talked about within this thesis, show is that quirky dramaturgies are about futures. There is something revolutionary about the ways in which autistic artists can use their lived experiences to manifest these satirical embodiments of the oppression they have faced or still face. Within these performance worlds, we are witness to new ways of seeing or doing that imagine a world and future that has freed itself from neuronormative, and often capitalist hierarchies. Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner emphasise this point drawing upon the interwoven lived experiences of the artists that implemented these techniques within the devising process. They write that:

> Devising processes tend to reflect the particular places, spaces and people involved and the immediate contexts of the work tend to be woven into the performance. The compositional

> challenge is therefore to define and shape the material from the living process and from the dialogue between people involved.[227]

The lived experience of our autism is an effective creative and structural tool in creating frameworks that at once both embrace an atypical structure while challenging neuronormative hierarchies. In physically embodying this fact through the use of exaggerated personas in otherworldly and dystopic futures, the performance takes a shape beyond a more neuronormative performance structure, as our lived experiences come to shape the world and frameworks of the performance. Selwyn's own lived experiences underpin their performance's form and structure as they embody and satirise gendered stereotypes with playful glee.

4.5: *#Binariesbegone* the Alternative Documentary

Selwyn like Binchy, works with theatre company Access All Areas on performance projects, and has performed at festivals and theatres across the UK, intersecting their experiences as a non-binary and autistic person with an autobiographical performance style. *#Binariesbegone* is no exception to this way of making work for Selwyn, as the performance imagines a future wherein gender has been outlawed, with the state celebrating the anniversary of their revolution. A clear parody of gender abolition rhetoric, the performance is a means of articulating the importance of personal self-identification and the state's attempts to dictate normative rhetoric by restricting how one might choose to express themselves. As a result, the show takes on this extra dimension of Selwyn navigating this future personally and how these normative approaches exist today, something autistic and queer people often have to navigate via passing. The audience functions as guests at a museum exhibit on the history of the revolution, with Selwyn playing the role of a museum guide hologram. They begin to take the form of what a typical twenty-first century person was like, and we begin to see Selwyn transform physically in physicality and costume into this grotesque gendered

[227] Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Revised Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p.174

stereotype of female traits and aesthetics. Sylvie, the name of the persona she has taken on, then proceeds to give a historical presentation detailing the events and policies that led to the rise of their society. The use of real-life events and media events within *#Binariebesgone* presents an interesting alternative reality piece of documentary theatre that uses real life documentation to imagine and construct the futures these pieces of documentation might yet manifest. Media figures and popular culture make up the factors that led to the development of the future #Binariesbegone takes place within. The performance's framing as a museum exhibit, with the tour guide embodying the past through new age technologies and acts of passing frames the show. The structuring of the show within a futuristic museum articulates ideas around the theatre event being a form of documentation, and the performance of self. Carol Martin writes that:

> Media is 'evidence' that what is purported to have happened actually did happen. It both functions as a record of events and also as a form of testimony. As testimony, media can be unquestionable witness or witness that needs to be cross examined. In documentary theatre, there is typically the event that happened, the media version(s) of the event that happened, and the theatrical version of the event that happened.[228]

Media is a form of documentation recording events and affirming the past and informing of the present. The performance event is therefore documented by media, by livestreams or live recordings that are shown on streaming services, cinemas or television channels, while production images pertain to a visual documenting of theatre performances that capture moments from the performance. When documentary style theatrical performances and the intersecting of media into the live performance event occurs then, theatre becomes a manifesting and performing of testimony and historical documentation, bringing to the stage the events of the past. Within the

[228] Carol Martin, 'Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel', *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p.75.

context of *#Binariesbegone* however, there is a manifestation of real-life figures and events being taken onto satirical and speculative trajectories to get to the dystopian future of Selwyn's show.

From here one might feel a sense of [dis]comfort when presented with information and trying to discern its authenticity in an era of virulent disinformation from alterative media outlets. Here, Sylvie is a backwards looking piece of fakery of a world we have lived experience existing within. Of attempting to pass, Carol Martin argues that:

> Theoretically, documentary theatre is about the truth, or a version of the truth, of what came before it, the live event. An event captured by media is assumed to have actually taken place – what's more – to have taken place in the way the media recorded it. Even though we know the media 'cooks' its raw data both in the very recording and even more certainly in the editing, presentation, distribution, and commenting on events (take the vast difference in the way NBC and Al Jazeera report events in Iraq), we still tend to accept as true what we see, the convergence of theatre and theory again.[229]

Responding to Cook's analysis in relation to the neuroqueer features of *#Binariesbegone*, there are multiple intersecting elements here of truth and fiction from Selwyn's relation to their museum presentation style and her persona to the performance of gender, sexuality and neurology in forming acts of passing. As a non-binary autistic, Selwyn posits the triad of gender, sexuality and neurology as intersecting components of passing, and the [dis]comfort one might find in passing or negotiating the neurotypical world. The documentation of the world Sylvie exists within and their own placement within that world as a non-binary autistic emulates a tongue in cheek placement of their own body as visible within a world that removes or ignores such signifiers. The autistic artist present on the stage performing within the future setting of the show acts out performances of the past in an interesting temporal play, neuroqueering the ways in which one might behave or navigate the world. For me personally I find this the most striking part of *#Binariebesgone* and what makes it

[229] Ibid.

so [dis]comforting. Performance and reality, fiction and fact intersect in such ways as to construct these homogenous identities within western society. We then, as people outside of the sphere of the typical, given that we are autistics, then manifest our own fictions via passing to placate societal pressures to 'fit in'. Why this strikes me, and why it is so [dis]comforting, is because I become concerned that autistic people seeking employment within the arts are having to 'fit in' to structures and frameworks that they might feel uncomfortable opting into. There is no commitment by institutions to make relaxed and flexible access and support practices to help assist autistic people. And I am equally concerned that institutions within the arts sector, and the wider employment landscape for autistics across the UK, are perpetuating their own fictions in their policy making process. This is somewhat speculative, but data certainly shows disabled people within the arts to be below the national average of disabled employment. These fictions about autism, and the ways in which media emulate these alternating realities, are also distinctly felt in the governmental legislation that has failed to help autistic people.

4.6: Neuroqueer Satire

Fundamental to what makes the performance practice of Selwyn is imagining a future that has brought oppressive neuronormative structures to their extreme. Yergeau argues that 'Autism destroys – and norms need destroying. Antisociality is our referent, and destruction our method.'[230] Yergeau posits a revolutionary quality of autism in its inherent, destructive, atypical qualities, and its capacity to disrupt norms. Autism has the potential to manifest emancipatory neurodivergent futures. Quirky dramaturgical practices are used by Selwyn to posit ways in which embodied otherness might be used to neuroqueer and stir [dis]comfort in the ugly reflection of the systems they have to live and fight against. Performance makers who abide by quirky dramaturgy as the structural choice for their work understand that personas reflect sharp satirical reflection of the issues faced by autistic artists, and place at the forefront of the art the presence and subjectivity of

[230] Yergeau, p.78

the autistic individual. Yergeau continues, in writing on autistic futures:,' [who wants to imagine] an expense, an after, a not-yet realized, a potentiality beyond the expiration of autistic motions, gestures, echoes, ephemera.'[231] These autistic futures are manifested through quirky dramaturgy, not just in relation to neuroqueering neuronormative rhetoric, but also in making performances that are accessible and comfortable. It is through the relationship of quirky dramaturgy and performance makers that we can create theatrical experiences and futures for autistic theatregoers that imagine futures or worlds of safety, responsive to their needs, and how we can look to the future to make change and reform that helps the lives of autistic people. *#Binariesbegone* creates an alternative reality that fundamentally places at the forefront of quirky dramaturgy the ways in which the theory and practice can address issues of support and care for autistic artists. A [dis]comfort that is brought upon us by Selwyn by using the satirical persona of Sylvie to neuroqueer the frameworks that seek to oppress them. *#Binariesbegone* also implements access and support for autistic artists into their work, taking a relaxed theatrical approach within the contexts of quirky dramaturgies that pinpoint a future and manifestation that is not just [dis]comforting to neuronormative frameworks, but open and comforting to autistic theatregoers. The politics of power and the shifts of how audiences might engage with the artist are underscored by the ways in which they relate to the worlds and personas.

Stott explains that 'satire exists all over the media, and is by no means an exclusive effect of comedy, but it is the most directly political of comic forms and the one that has caused the majority of censorious government interventions.'[232] Stott develops that 'Satire aims to denounce folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the subjection of ideas to humorous analysis.'[233] Selwyn's practice does this through their character of Sylvie a comedic and gross over exaggerations of framing identities that, through their performance, is shown to be grotesquely a [dis]comforting mirror of the way in which we approach autism or, more specifically, the intersecting natures of

[231] Ibid.
[232] Stott, p.109
[233] Ibid.

autism, gender and sexuality. For Selwyn and Sylvie, the satire aims towards the performativity of gender and the intersecting histories it shares with autism, with Sylvie becoming this cartoonish manifestation of every feminine stereotype as a way of explaining what gender 'was' within the context of the futuristic setting. Selwyn approaches their satirical persona with a distinct queer analysis of the absurdity of attempts to categorise and conform to these heteronormative world views. Satire for Stott:

> takes its subject matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to revisit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests, or realpolitik. [234]

What Selwyn does is approach issues around how people perceive and view autism, neuroqueering the rhetorical approaches to autism that have long since posed issues to the everyday life of autistic people, especially around ableist misconceptions around autism. For Alison Kafer, 'the public believes we [people with disabilities] must prove ourselves before we are allowed to do things nondisabled people consider their right.'[235] Quirky dramaturgy challenges the beliefs and stereotypes that autistic people are incapable of looking after themselves, and that autistic people must perform and assert their 'functionality'. Instead, quirky dramaturgy offers creative freedom for artists to express themselves and their perceptions of the world, by asserting their autonomy and independence. Therefore, from an arts employability perspective, autistic artists face structural and cultural barriers in finding employment within the arts. Theatre statistically employs disabled people at a higher proportional rate to the rest of the sector, with the *Making a Shift Report* by Arts Council England, with 33.9% of disabled arts employment coming from theatre.[236] This carries over into artistic staff as well, with 30.3% of disabled artistic staff coming from theatre.[237] Despite this, disabled people in the arts find themselves struggling to maintain permanent contractual work a

[234] Stott, p.109.
[235] Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) p.81.
[236] Arts Council England, 'Making A Shift Report' (Manchester: Arts Council England, 2018) p.20.
[237] Ibid.

longstanding issue in the arts sector and multiple other sectors nationally. The report finds that 'Four per cent of disabled employees are on permanent contracts, slightly higher than the percentage of disabled people in the workforce overall (3.4 per cent).'[238] The report also indicates that this number is lower still for disabled female workers in the arts, at 3.2%.[239]

The data shows that self-producing autistic artists have the funding available to self-produce, which then can satirise and draw attention to ill-informed and problematic approaches to autism which many areas of the arts sector still face. Support and access for disabled people within theatre is higher than any other area of the arts sector, meaning that autistic people do have resources available to them if they need assistance and support. Specialist staff within theatres are employed at a higher rate to the rest of the sector within the report at 25.1%, and the growth of autistic artists self-producing work or working with theatre companies specialising in learning disabled art and support such as Access All Areas show a positive trajectory for autistic artists.[240] However, disabled people also struggle to maintain long-term sustainable employment, and while funding is available for freelance artists, sustainable long term employment opportunities evade disabled people within the UK. By having a more relaxed and flexible employment strategy that breaks down access barriers in seeking employment, we will create a more dramatic spike in employment numbers across the arts sector in whatever discipline or employment position an autistic person might be in. Advocacy and change in policy and employability in the arts for neurodivergent and disabled peoples will come from the artists and audiences themselves making their voices heard, producing work outside of these mainstream spaces and encouraging autistic audiences to support and engage with autistic artists and their work. Quirky dramaturgical practices and its features challenge and seek to overthrow this neuronormative hierarchy in place of a fluid space were identity and neurology meet free of prejudice and misinformation.

[238] Ibid., p.21
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid.

4.7: Access, Support, and Resisting Homogeny

The quirky dramaturgical practices on display by Selwyn in *#Binariesbegone* is a satirical approach to the ways in which the dissolution of identities produces a stagnant hegemonic set of identities that resemble homunculi performing the past. Instead of a rigid heteronormative approach to gender and neurology, Selwyn's satirical performance articulates the importance of fluidity and self-expression instead of conforming to a societal ideal. By performing in a dystopic world devoid of personal identification, and cold in its ideas of individualism, with the autistic becoming a homunculus, Selwyn wholly encapsulates the importance of relaxed and fluid approaches to care and support for the most vulnerable and marginalised groups within society. The eradication of ways that it is possible to identify one's gender or sexuality, signals an extreme manifestation of heteronormativity that imagines one perceived group and human archetype. One of the most immediate challenges and issues such a world faces is the access for funding, and what voices are and are not heard. That one's open expression and identification as autistic, as a female, as queer, as trans, as a person of colour could be seen as illegal or against the interests of the state speaks to the dystopic world view of those who imagine such futures. The most abundantly concerning issue here is the lack of access and support for people in a world that takes such an extremely abolitionist approach to personal identification. Support and access for autistic artists in particular in this case would find themselves without the financial and creative support that help them make and sustain practices. And the removal of identity politics from the public discourse and political framework would cripple both the advocacy done by autistic people and their allies, alongside erasing their lived experiences and ways of self-identifying. So *#Binariesbegone* is also deeply discomforting not just in its exploration and performance of gender and sexuality, but also in the ways in which the absence of the ways we might choose to identify with ourselves or others can deeply restrict and damage how we engage or express who we are.

The 'Making a Shift Report' lays out a number of recommendations for the ways in which the arts sector might better support and employ disabled people. The report lays out a number of proposed revisions and reforms within the sector and how the Arts Council can best implement them. The report suggests that they should 'Review and/or ensure their recruitment practices encourage applications from disabled people, considering alternative formats for application, job descriptions and person specifications, and understanding of unconscious bias.'[241] Additionally making clearer or accessible language in funding applications for autistic artists would have an increase in autistic artists obtaining funding from organisations such as the Arts Council. As Selwyn's performance expressly highlights, the need to understand identities as divergent and difference as part of the human condition is imperative, as seeking to normalise or homogenise identity and normality restricts the access and support of those who do not fit that category of 'normal'. This feeds into the next recommendation from the report, which seeks to:

> Promote appropriate budgeting for access and support costs within all of its funding schemes Arts Use monitoring and relationships to ensure that National Portfolio Organisation equality action plans give due weight to the issues relevant to disabled people, and to developing and showcasing excellence by disabled artists.[242]

Here the commitment is to promote and bring to the forefront the work of disabled artists and issues facing disabled people, helping to cultivate and develop work that can give voices and employment to disabled people within the arts. Subsequently the report recommends that 'All training and development providers are recommended to review the format of their programmes to ensure they are accessible to disabled people, and that (for example) residential sessions do not create unnecessary barriers.'[243] A peer reviewed, flexible style of gaining feedback from community

[241] Ibid., p.63
[242] 'Making a Shift Report', p.63
[243] Ibid.

members they wish to provide access for is a highly effective manner of ensuring a more robust shift in employment policy. As the report itself highlights in its recommendation to:

> Ensure peer networking mechanisms support deaf and disabled people to develop their careers and creativity. Organisations should review the inclusivity and accessibility of board recruitment and working practices to increase the proportion of disabled board members and their ability to play a full governance role. [244]

This theme of reform recommendations continues within the medium-term goals it sets, with the 'Making a Shift' report highlighting that the arts sector needs to 'Identify opportunities to spread good practice in employing and developing disabled people within the workforce, sharing ideas, resources and approaches to change working practices and cultures that currently disable people.'[245] The report lays out the importance of understanding the needs of disabled people and ensuring that workforces have effective strategies when it comes to recruitment and career development for disabled people. However, despite understanding the need for such reformation for disabled people, there is little explanation on how employers might do this. The report continues with this vague language writing that they propose to 'Continue to try to work with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to raise awareness of the needs of disabled people in the arts, especially freelance artists and practitioners in relation to Access to Work and other support payments.'[246] The report writes of the continual work with government bodies within the UK to raise awareness, but there is no clear mention of calls for policy reform or thinking about how DWP policy directly impacts disabled people working in the arts sector. The report seeks to create greater access to work for disabled people however, something that has much hindered autistic people who might find traditional recruitment formats to be overstimulating or stressful. The report aims to 'Collaborate to create simple guides to Access to Work for disabled artists and those working in arts and culture, to

[244] Ibid., p..63.
[245] Ibid., p.64.
[246] Ibid.

reduce complexity and encourage more effective use,' as well as continuing 'to develop apprenticeship, paid internships, start-up schemes and other entry routes into arts and culture, including schemes specifically targeted at deaf and disabled people.'[247] So the report aims to target and highlight the ways in which access into arts sector employment can be better utilised and optimised in such a way as to be more elastic. The report by implication understands that there are various modes of engaging with a workforce and creating access and support for employees and prospective employees. This approach is highly beneficial to autistics who might find the standard frameworks of seeking employment confusing or stressful and thus cannot effectively showcase their value and skillsets to employers. Not having a more relaxed and flexible approach to employment in favour of more homogeneous, one-size-fits-all frameworks, which serve to exclude autistics from roles both within and outside the arts sector. Selwyn's performance perfectly captures the absurdity and dangerous rhetorical end point in thinking about the removal of identity politics and of modes of self-identification as an effective and beneficial strategy for all. The report feels the best manner of ensuring this diverse approach comes by working 'with further and higher education to influence provision of appropriate training courses at all levels.'[248] Again, however, the language used within the report here is vague, but by having quirky dramaturgy work with further and higher education, we can begin to demystify our perceived existences as autistic people and instead think about articulating ideas of care and support. Theatre and performance prove an invaluable forum through which artists can educate the public while giving employment and funding opportunities to autistic artists.

These recommendations were made in 2018. However, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have both impacted the arts sector and people's employment opportunities since then, so the question is how effective have these recommendations been since the publication of the report and where does this situate the autistic artist within the industry? Conservative government policy

[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid.

making towards the arts, and in particular towards funding and support of autistic and disabled artists across the UK reflects some of the more draconian pieces of legislation that have been passed. Brexit will have a long-lasting negative impact on autistic people within the UK, as the UK government will no longer be held to EU laws or the European Court of Justice. Conservative government approaches post EU referendum have taken distinctly hard-line approaches to cultural issues and 'political correctness'. The Conservative governments of the UK have a history of abhorrent treatment of disabled people and those in care. Constant cuts to disability benefits under the David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson governments have placed a chokehold upon disabled people, slowly erasing their presence and taking away access and support from them. In 2020, a Department of Work and Pensions whistle-blower revealed that the UK Government's Kickstart Scheme for young people seeking employment did 'not pay any specific attention to disabled young people who are often furthest from the jobs market.'[249] Disability Rights UK CEO and Lyric Theatre Board member Kamran Mallick said:

> It is deeply disappointing to see disabled young people being excluded from Kickstart. Those who desperately want their first opportunity to work but who aren't on Universal Credit. Disabled young people have higher unemployment rates and should be one of the groups the government is supporting to get on the jobs ladder […] Kickstart also requires employers to be able to take on 30 placements, which risks effectively precluding smaller employers which may already have links with disabled young people, as they need to partner up with intermediaries or representatives of bigger firms to be a part of bids for the funding. This need to buddy up creates more red tape and an extra barrier for firms with less resources.[250]

[249] John Pring, 'DWP Silent Over Whistle-Blower's Disability Job Advisor Claims', *Disability News Service*, *Employment* (10th September, 2020) https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-silent-over-whistle-blowers-disability-job-adviser-claims/ [Accessed 15/11/2020]

[250] Kamran Mallick, Quoted in, 'Kickstart Scheme Discriminates Against Disabled Young People', *Disability Rights UK,* https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/september/kickstart-scheme-discriminates-against-disabled-young-people [Accessed 15/11/2020]

The core crux of the Conservative party approach to employment policy as Mallick argues, is a surface level general blanket employment policy for young people that in placing all groups together under one umbrella policy, fails to adequately or effectively cater for any young person in an effective manner. Specifically, for autistic people, it is highly exclusionary of their needs while simultaneously forcing smaller companies to seek larger third parties to access funding which all employers over the country will be fighting for, regardless of their size or previous links with disabled communities across the UK. This sort of approach is dangerous and problematic to autistic employability, and within the arts specifically it lays the potential framework for beginning to overcentralise arts funding to London based organisations, thus slowly choking regional theatres and artists of funding and resources. Selwyn's *#Binariesbegone* uses real life documentation to create this fictional future that imagines no sex or gender. The world of *#Binariesbegone* echoes the issues of homogeneity felt in the present. Indeed, the fundamental criticism her performance and her persona of Sylvie present is that those who seek those forms of abolishment within queer and feminist discourses are replacing one form of homogeny with another. The [dis]comfort of not understanding one's place in this performative reality, of feeling other and out of place while this futuristic museum curator performs past homogenous and atypical views on gender articulates why diverse experiences and identities should be cultivated and celebrated. The employment contexts of watching a non-binary autistic artist on stage making and performing work emphasises this point. It provides a unique perspective that is invaluable to audiences. Selwyn's show makes us imagine the implications of this world through the usage of alternative histories. As absurd and comical as it might be to see, we are equally [dis]comforted when left to imagine the very real and extreme turns western neoliberal society is taking by tearing down and challenging the rights of marginalised groups and communities. Because of these circumstances, it becomes important to protect the rights of autistic people, with issues of employment support and access being raised by the presence of autistic artists on the theatre stage.

4.8: Support for Autistic Artists

The ways in which we go about achieving more robust means of employment access for autistic artists lies in the features of quirky dramaturgy, and is articulated in practice by the performance makers themselves. Binchy and Selwyn's use of personas and the issues of autistic representation which they each raise complement one another – neuroqueering autistic employment barriers and questioning the degree of flexible support for autistic artists. Eleanor Buckley, Elizabeth Pellicano and Anna Remington write that while 'finding and maintaining work is a desired goal' for many autistic individuals, only 16% of autistic people are in fulltime employment, with 32% holding any form of employment.[251] 11% of the 2080 respondents that took part in a 2016 employment survey by the National Autistic Society indicated that they hoped to seek employment in some capacity within the arts sector.[252] Buckley, Pellicano and Remington's study found that 'employers had mixed views regarding what type of resources would be appropriate to help them learn more about supporting autistic people in the workplace.'[253] This signals that even if an autistic person finds employment within the arts, their employers might now have the training or understanding to provide access that is adequately relaxed and flexible.

The need to address employment for autistic people within the arts speaks to the broader exclusion from theatre which we have often faced. Chapters 2 and 3 already have laid out the ways in which the form of space and audience might help shape inclusive performance events for autistic theatregoers, but these quirky dramaturgical practices are also of importance to the artist. The autistic artist has an important role in the creation of performance and how it is experienced within quirky dramaturgy. Cian Binchy and Xandri Selwyn both receive assistance and support with their work through Access All Areas, an arts organisation that provides support and arts consultation for learning disabled artists within the UK. This raises the question of how those relationships between

[251] Buckley, Pellicano and Remington, pp.45-59, (p.45).
[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid., p.56

dramaturg and actor might manifest in relation to facilitation and support. This can often be a tentative dance, however practices and performance making methodologies like the relationship between Binchy, Selwyn and Access All Areas underscore how quirky dramaturgies can be used to help autistic artists to deal with organisational tasks that they might find difficult and confusing. Dramaturgy is at its core about communication – the communication of an idea and the form it might be moulded into and engaged with. Turner and Behrndt see this as making 'us aware of the mechanisms of communication and the artificial construction of imaginary (real) worlds, even while we are moved and engaged with them.'[254] Turner and Behrndt argue that dramaturgy articulates itself to the audience through our engagement with the performance world and its relation to social reality. In making us aware of the mechanics of the world we are in during the duration of a performance, quirky dramaturgy highlights the social and cultural construction of the real world as well as the fictional world. This makes the presence of the autistic artist all the more potent because the performance world they create and their visibility within it is in stark contrast to the neuronormative rhetoric that informs the world outside the performance event. It is because of this construction and contrast between the worlds which quirky dramaturgy creates and the real world, that the autistic performer embodies issues of autistic employment within the arts. This is due to their access and support to work being greatly reduced through neuronormative rhetoric, ableist access and support cuts from the UK government, and ill-informed misconceptions about autistic people.

Susan M. Hayward, Keith R. McVilly and Mark A. Stokes, feed into this belief of how access can communicate ideas within an environment, specially framing this through the lens of autism and employment. They write that 'Managerial support to employees with autism who provide the ability to alter their physical environment to help self-manage their sensory needs might facilitate inclusion

[254]Behrndt and Turner, p.197

in the workplace.'[255] Hayward, Mcvilly and Stokes write of the positive impact which responsive, thoughtful access can offer to autistic employees by fostering greater agency and independence. In doing so, workplace environments become more inclusive and accessible because the sensory and social aspects within a work setting that an autistic employee might see as stressful or difficult to navigate are reframed to help cater to their access needs and make them feel comfortable. Quirky dramaturgical practices are not simply to be used within theatrical settings and the application outside of the sphere of the arts is imperative in making quirky dramaturgy a theory and practice that looks forward towards the ways in which autistic access to various aspects of UK society can be made easy, understandable and flexible to the needs of the individual.

4.9: [Dis]comfort to reform

The quirky dramaturgical practices of Binchy and Selwyn uncovers this and brings to the forefront the issues that face autistic people when it comes to employment within the arts. The visibility of the autistic artist upon the stage resonates with many questions about the broader scope of why autistic artists struggle to find employability within the arts sector outside of self-producing work and engaging with arts consultancy firms. With the arts facing an unprecedented crisis with the far-reaching economic damage and health and safety fears of the COVID-19 pandemic, these matters take on a much larger significance. So far, we have talked about policy and legislation that finds itself within strange liminal states or needs to be more robustly implemented. But how do we go about changing the current employment climate for autistic people in order to get more autistic people employed within the arts? Trade union representative and Co-Chair of the TUC Disabled Worker's Committee Janine Booth has written extensively on the ways in which positive policy reform can help to create workplace equality for autistic people. Booth lays out a number of key reform points that she believes will positively impact autistic people within the workplace:

[255] Susan M. Hayward, Keith R. McVilly and Mark A. Stokes, 'Autism and employment: What works', *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders,* Vol.60 (April, 2019) pp.48-58 (pp.55-56)

- A commitment to applying the social model of disability to autism
- Recognition that the population and therefore the workforce is neurologically diverse
- Involvement of autistic workers in developing, implementing and monitoring the policy through their representative trade unions
- Identifying barriers to autistic workers' participation
- Identifying ways to remove those barriers
- A commitment to develop policy on other neurodivergent conditions, such as dyslexia and ADHD
- Continuous monitoring of the measures taken to reduce the barriers and the facility to identify new measures[256]

These negative unhealthy environments exist within the arts, with a number of theatrical productions often applying a creative process that is set by the creative teams in control of the projects. This means that autistic and other disabled performers are often situated as ethical outliers, as they are viewed as incapable physically or cognitively of dealing with the intensity of the production. This might be framed through the workload of the rehearsal and live performances, or the roles themselves being far too emotionally difficult to perform. In these contexts, autistic exclusion is framed as a faux progressive stance that is saving autistics from being physically or mentally harmed. In reality it is a legal and insurance related manoeuvre that helps lower potential insurance costs on performers who might have additional needs and removes any dangers of legal culpability if anything might go wrong that would cause harm to said autistic. To return briefly for an instant to *All in a Row* from Chapter 2, we might see their motivations for using a puppet instead of an autistic actor as being fundamentally wrapped up in the ethical and legal concerns of employing

[256] Booth, p.111

such a person. That their justification for this choice was that the role was too intensive for any autistic performer to perform demonstrate a very narrow and reductive view on autism and autistic performers.

By comparing this to the work of Binchy and Selwyn, whose use of quirky dramaturgy which challenges neuronormative rhetoric, one can see an interesting contrast in regards to the role of the autistic artist when self-producing as opposed to working within theatre institutions directly. Their work is both reflective of the issues which autistic people face in regards to being othered by neuronormative frameworks, but also their own relationship and positioning within the arts and the importance to advocate for autistic theatre makers. For theatres to make more progressive changes, more so in a period of uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, theatres need to understand the systemic issues that affects autistic and disabled people in seeking employment. The first key way that the arts can make a more progressive side step is by moving towards more social models of disability within the contexts of employment. At present autistic and disabled people within the arts are faced with boundless red tape that often makes their otherness framed around legal and financial concerns about access and culpability. Having a more robust and responsive network of disability officers within theatres and working with disabled arts consultancies to create robust policies that are better thought out, will result in a more effective and efficient means of providing care and support for autistic people working within the arts. Theatres might want to think about how auditions are structured for autistic people who might struggle in a large crowd or might find themselves anxious around new people and thus inhibited to perform. Theatres can take a relaxed approach to the way that auditions are framed and structured, using social stories, chill out zones and a space better adapted to ensuring that autistic people are not overstimulated by visual, sonic or physical elements. We might think of the ways in which application forms are often unfriendly, confusing and stressful for autistic people, and how alternative modes of application such as video applications might be better suited to autistic performers. As Booth writes on the breaking of such barriers in regards to applications, ‘Job application forms can minimise barriers similarly,

straightforward, no jargon or unnecessary questions, the option of submitting the application online or on hard copy and space to request further information or adjustments.'[257]

These are important ways of beginning to think about the ways we might reform access to employment for autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy is used in *MADHOUSE* and *#Binariesbegone* as a way of placing people outside of their perceived states of comfort, and educating them about the power dynamics between neuronormative rhetoric and autistic people and the importance of advocating for alternative approaches. The twofold political implication of the autistic artist on stage and the issues of navigating contextually within the theatre and its failings to effectively accommodate and provide access for autistic people, makes the issue of autistic visibility in the arts an important one. What quirky dramaturgy can do for autistic theatre makers and their practices is highlight how neuronormative biases within society others and oppresses autistic people, making it harder for them to gain adequate access and support. Therefore, when we see the personas of the man baby or Sylvie from Binchy and Selwyn, they are neuroqueering and creating a sense of [dis]comfort in the audience who are faced with the realities of neuronormative rhetoric and how it affects the lives of autistic people. In their parodies and critiques of potential neurologically dystopian futures and parallels to the present worlds autistic people have to navigate and fight through on a daily basis, their performances also bring about that rallying cry for change to systems that have been inherently oppressive to autistic people, as well as other neurodivergent and disabled people.

Within the context of addressing these biases within the arts, it is important for autistic artists to have their voices heard and place pressure upon institutions to make the progressive changes that are needed to provide access to autistic people within the theatre, be it as an audience member or as an employee. Access practices need to change in order to avoid regressions in the

[257] Ibid., p.64.

degrees of positive change that have been made for autistic people within the theatre. As Booth writes:

> Employers could change their practices. A few may be trying to do so. We can hope that a few may be trying to do so. We can hope that a few more will but if we wait for employers to make their workplace autism friendly voluntarily, we will be waiting a long time – far longer than a fair society would expect anyone to wait for progress and equality.[258]

Indeed, while it is true that theatres have engaged in trying to create more opportunities for autistic people on the stage, the growth rate of a percentage point a year does not make for a sustainable strategy. And with employment within the arts specifically likely to drop significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, any minor progress is likely to be undone as autistic and disabled people lose their jobs. This is an issue that theatres have likewise faced when looking at relaxed theatre and theatre access policies for audiences (as discussed in Chapter 2). There is a large overarching cultural issue within theatre wherein the bare minimum seems to be the norm for autistic theatre access.

However, there are some immediate changes we can make to autistic people and their employability without being beholden to the inaction of an actively ableist UK government. Booth lays out a number of relaxed employment changes, and writes that employability chances for autistic people can increase if theatres:

- Avoid insisting on qualifications or employment history not essential for the job
- Provide training to fill gaps left by inadequate education and prior employment
- Waive or reduce requirements for people whose qualifications or job history do not reflect their true abilities
- Use other means to assess an applicant's suitability[259]

[258] Booth, p.109.
[259] Booth, p.61

Alongside these changes, Booth also lays out relaxed employment changes for job adverts and descriptions. Booth lays out the following:

- being clear and concise, using straightforward language
- Avoiding jargon and unnecessary information
- Including information about support, adjustments and the workplace environment
- Including only job requirements that are objectively necessary
- Avoiding specifying personality types required, such as 'outgoing' or 'team player'; instead specifying job roles such as 'serving customers' [260]

These proposed changes have a number of immediate positive impacts on the ways in which arts employment for autistic people can be handled. Being able to provide a number of pathways to employment when autistic people already face educational and employability barriers is imperative. The arts sector needs to become much more aware of the issues which autistic people might have in areas of qualifications and experience due to barriers put in place, and provide a degree of flexibility in terms of access and engagement for autistic people seeking employment. Some UK drama schools and theatre companies such as Access All Areas provide educational and professional support and development already, while practice development funding for disabled people across the UK is disproportionately higher than the rate of arts employment. Creatives appear to want to work outside of mainstream sites, be it out of current access circumstance or ideological reasonings, and so theatres might want to think about the ways in which they might engage with, entice in and allow for autistic employment opportunities, be it as actors, other creative roles and so forth. If the job application and the language they use are altered so as to not be so obtuse or impenetrable for autistic people, this can be seen to be a first step toward a more proactive employment policy within the arts. Social stories can provide a useful resource that is already implemented in relaxed

[260] Booth, pp.63-64.

performances, and can help autistic people get used to new work environments and job interviews, while we begin to think more expansively about the sort of traits that are deemed desirable within employment. This isn't to say that we should simply give a job to every person, but rather it suggests that more relaxed and flexible ways of thinking about skills from applicants, would allow each applicant the chance to showcase their abilities and knowledge so that they can have the chance to best highlight why they are the right person for the job vacancy. If we want to make a better future for autistic people within the arts sector, it starts now in the present with the ways in which we can create more immediate impactful change that can lead towards policy and legislation reform at an industry and governmental level.

For quirky dramaturgy to be effective for autistic people in regards to making positive, impactful policy reform, we need to look far beyond the realm of theatre institutions, and put a larger weight of responsibility upon the government to make legislation changes that help autistic people instead of hindering them. Booth argues that first and foremost, education reform needs to occur. Booth writes that 'To give autistic job applicants a fair start with others we need an education system that fulfils the potential of all, whatever their neurological status, and an employment system that does the same.'[261] Education reform for Booth is important in diversifying and catering qualifications to the needs of the student, therefore creating a learning framework as diverse as the different ways in which our brains are wired neurologically. To do so is to understand that there is not one binary way of getting an education and qualifications, and that can begin to open up and diversify the sorts of skills and traits a prospective employer might look for. Theatre and performance can help with regard of education, with performances like Binchy's performance in *MADHOUSE and* Selwyn's *#Binariesbegone* (as well as Vijay Patel's *Sometimes I Leave* in Chapter 3) demystifying autism and trying to better inform audiences through the lived experiences of the autistic artist. Doing so also spreads better acceptance and understanding of neurology as a

[261] Booth., p.61.

spectrum – creating a much more informed and caring understanding of neurodivergent and learning-disabled people from a young age within the education system.

Beyond issues of education reform, to further break down these employment barriers for autistic people, there needs to be public spending invested into services and jobs. Booth views that:

> Austerity-driven policies create significant barriers to autistic workers. Removing these barriers means adopting an alternative to austerity. Instead of cutting services and jobs, an alternative would expand public services that both meet needs and create jobs. Autistic people need more services-diagnosis, support workers, learning support assistants, job coaches and more – and more jobs across the public services will mean more jobs for autistic workers. [262]

This is important to understand because while theatres are responsible for their lacklustre blasé approach to autistic access, the state itself is directly involved in the evisceration of public funding to assist and protect disabled people and their support networks, therefore making finding employment and financial security an arduous and difficult task. Binchy and Selwyn's work then is neuroqueer in the sense that we view autistic actors on stage, acting and working, while resources and support on a national level are gutted. It is important to understand the arts and their employment rates for autistic people although alarmingly low, are also systemic of a policy making strategy by Conservative members of government that has made it increasingly harder and harder for them to find employment. Austerity based policies and the taking away or the destabilising of support networks for autistic and disabled people across the UK has long reaching consequences for employment opportunities for autistic people within the arts, more so when arts institutions are already facing funding cuts. The funding and support of public services has far reaching implications for increasing autistic employment. Binchy and Selwyn both present in their quirky dramaturgical practices futures that frame otherness and the atypical as disruptive, [dis]comforting aspects for a society that sees them as against some binary normative standard. Binchy is incarcerated in a

[262] Booth, pp.94-95

dystopian insane asylum and Sylvie is a museum exhibit performing gender for their audience despite long since outlawing any form of identity politics from their society. Binchy and Selwyn have both created work that asks us to oppose neuronormative rhetoric – the source of the oppressive and offensive portrayals and dialogues about autism that pollute our identities and promote misinformation. It is that spectre of neuronormative hijacking of autistic issues that has placed autistic people within a sort of access and support stasis. One that is slowly and dramatically eroding around them. Binchy's man baby and Selwyn's Sylvie personas are those embodied stereotyped forms of very different but all too real monolithic ideas on neurological difference. Between a culture of infantilising autistic people and a media that is happy to enable ableist framings and talking points, it is hard for autistic people who advocate on their own behalf to be seen as having their own agency, or that they are capable of having the same degree of agency. We can see this through the policy engagement with autistic people in this chapter, and how Binchy and Selwyn's performances are responding to the people and policies claiming to speak for them. Kabie Brook writes that:

> Often we are not getting our voices heard and there is a huge disparity between what is being said and what is being heard. Tokenism is rife, it can often feel as if autistic people are only included because it is necessary to tick a box, that it is being done for the process rather than any usable or actionable output.[263]

This tokenistic surface level access and engagement with autistic people is underscored within the arts be it from the engagement with employment opportunity to the ways in which theatres routinely fail with access into theatrical events for autistic theatregoers. Brook continues:

> The autistic rights movement is really in its infancy. Autistic people's organisations are few and we do not hold senior or influential posts in the organisations that claim to represent and support

[263] Brook, Quoted in, Booth, p.117

us. By that I mean the large corporate charities that are still 'for' rather 'by' us, although hopefully we are seeing very small changes there.[264]

With neuronormative rhetoric and non-autistic people running numerous large scale autism organisations, it is imperative for autistic people to come together to create the sustainable support frameworks that at present do not exist. Performance makers and the quirky can help to facilitate this role by facilitating and bringing together people within the theatrical event that advocates for the autistic individual via the role of the autistic artist. In this sense we make performance and art that is by the autistic individual – giving greater agency over the theatrical experiences being offered and created.

The quirky dramaturgical practices used by Binchy and Selwyn, discussed in this chapter, aim at creating a critical engagement with autism-based issues in their audiences. Comic and satirical aspects allow for these performances to gain a degree of scope and reach in terms of general interest through which artists might have licence to play with or invert the expectations of the audience. The image of the man baby is an uncomfortable and yet ridiculous image that is both hilarious in the absurdity of the image of a grown man pretending to be a baby in tandem with the [di]comforting truth of the fact that this is how many people still view autistic people. Sylvie is both a comic character birthed from the idea of 'what if an alien or future culture had to recreate our own culture', all the while being [dis]comforting in the moment of understanding for many autistic and queer people, as they feel the need to pass due to personal safety or by being told by society that they are somehow broken or defunct. The agency of Binchy and Selwyn in creating their personas and the worlds their characters inhabit, emphasises the tensions autistic people face with how they are perceived and treated in the world.

This need for agency is important due to the legislative barriers between the government and autistic people, due to the concerns over the employment landscape post-Brexit, and the

[264] Ibid.

impacts it will have for autistic employment. A Disability Rights UK report by Anna Lawson and Liz Sayce into the impact of Brexit on disability documented:

> The concern that debate on Brexit seems to be all about trade, rather than the kind of society we want to live in. In as far as rights are discussed in a Brexit context, the most common issue flagged seems to be "workers' rights. These are vital, including to disabled people – but over half of disabled people of working age are not working, many more are in receipt of pensions and this focus omits attention to rights in areas such as accessibility, which are important whether or not people are 'workers'[265]

What is indeed striking is the fact that framing Brexit around trade as opposed to the rights of the workers raises issues for the understanding of employment issues for the general public. Specifically, within the context of autistic people, there is concern over the degree of agency or feedback that they will have in any form of access or support legislation designed to help them within the realms of employment. More so when the government is actively seeking to destabilise current support networks for autistic employment through the government's Kickstart programme. Charles Whitmore reveals this issue with the government not including autistic and disabled people within their decision-making processes, writing that:

> the failure to involve disabled people in the development of Brexit policy has implications for their wellbeing. A written question by Jo Stevens MP showed that UK government had not conducted an impact assessment on the effect of leaving the EU without an agreement on disabled people[266]

This sort of lack of communication with potentially affected communities around legislation, more so around Brexit, emphasises the wider systemic issues which the government has when it comes to

[265]Anna Lawson, Liz Sayce, *The Implications of Brexit for Disability Rights: Influencing Future Debate and Policy* (London: Disability Rights UK, 2017) p.5.
[266] Charles Whitmore, 'How Brexit Will Affect Disabled People's Lives and Rights', *LSE*, *Blogs* (January 13th, 2020) https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/01/13/how-brexit-will-affect-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights/ [Accessed 12/2/2020].

any form of social mobility or social welfare. The arts is one of many sectors, and autistics one of many groups impacted by Brexit and Conservative austerity politics that have restricted access and support. Binchy and Selwyn's performances are [dis]comforting to come face to face with, and understand at once the safety in having experiences validated by those who have lived them, and the drive to neuroqueer the frameworks that still treat their existences as other. Quirky dramaturgy shows that autistic people are not infantile, but are productive, creative, valued members of society that want their voices heard, and the support to help them reach their potential. Neuronormative understandings of functionality and how people should approach the job market means autistics can find themselves excluded. *MADHOUSE* and *#Binariesbegone* emphasises the importance of the future for quirky dramaturgy – of looking forward and thinking about change and creating better futures for autistics.

4.10: Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the features of quirky dramaturgy operate within the sphere of the performer, showcased by creating accessible pieces of performance for autistic people that address and examine autistic visibility. This visibility has manifested itself through the features of quirky dramaturgy – setting the performances of Binchy and Selwyn within dystopian futures. This creates [dis]comfort, and examines the issues of employment for autistic people. [Dis]comfort and its usages by Binchy and Selwyn within their performances underscores the fact that these [dis]comforting moments speak to the larger issues of inclusion and employment for autistic people within the arts. Specifically, we have looked at the ways in which employment data within the arts sector and government legislation paint a picture of an employment climate within the UK that is insufficient and often times ableist towards autistic and disabled people. Therefore, the futures and dialogues present within *MADHOUSE re:exit* and *#Binariesbegone* situate different realities and futures manifested from two present worlds representative of the systemic issues faced personally by Binchy and Selwyn. For Binchy, there is a sense of struggling with issues of infantilisation, and

bringing forth ideas of sideways growth and different approaches to the development and support of autistic people. For Selwyn, they begin to navigate their non-binary identity as an autistic person in relation to identity politics , presenting the forceful erasure of identities and enforcing of a new hegemonic norm.

What Binchy and Selwyn show then, is how quirky dramaturgy neuroqueers the neuronormative rhetoric around autistic functionality through performances set in the future – focusing on infantilisation and employment access. In presenting new ways in which the world might be, and in imagining those utopian or dystopian futures for autistic people, we can begin to imagine through art the socio-political futures of autistic people and the protections, support and access they might be provided. Hence, the use of different realties and futures by Binchy and Selwyn are important ways of educating neurotypical theatregoers on autistic issues free from neuronormative rhetorical intrusions that stir and promote autistic people to self-advocate. When presented with these worlds, the one prominent question one must ask themselves is – what can I do to make a change? Policy changes and reform happens first and foremost through grassroots activism and pressuring the arts sector and government to take steps to provide better protection and security for autistic people. The issue of employment within the arts is important within this discussion of futures as autistic people face not just the uncertain chaos of a post Brexit UK workplace market, but one that is also significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. With futures uncertain for the arts and many other sectors within the UK, and with autistic and disabled people facing further employment challenges, it is important to think about how we might proceed going forward, how me might see greater engagement with autistic people in creating work for theatres or in other roles within the arts. It is also important at this current moment in history to think about how we might protect the access and support that is currently existing within theatre organisations.

Chapter 5: Performance Access in Quirky Communities

Throughout this thesis, I have examined the ways in which quirky dramaturgy has been utilised throughout UK performance. From space, to audiences, to performers, to the policies that underpin autistic arts access, the connecting idea is that by bringing together autistic people in theatre environments, we can offer them freedom and safety via quirky dramaturgical practices. This chapter will examine the ways in which quirky dramaturgy – alongside its features of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness – impacts communities and welcomes their presence and participation in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. What previous chapters have argued for is the importance of communities in the creative and reformist endeavours to make safe, enjoyable theatrical experiences for autistic people. This chapter will examine the assembly of communities within quirky dramaturgy, and how they function critically and practically. I will be examining the ways in which performance events create models of advocacy and communication that are reflective of the community which they represent and provide access for. What will be shown as fundamental to this is the ways in which autistics communicate within community settings and the strategies used in interpersonal engagement and advocacy, and what this means going forward for autistic arts access within the UK. I shall showcase the ways, under these logics, that festival and digital settings serve as the vehicle that allow autistics to communicate with one another in spaces that are reflective of their own experiences and perceptions of the world.

I will examine the organisation and festival going experience of the 2019 Autism Arts Festival at the University of Kent through the examination of a performance at the festival: Annette Foster's *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang*. I will also analyse Flute Theatre's online 2020 production of *Pericles Online*, and, alongside Foster and the Autism Arts Festival, will show them as practical examples of the range of ways quirky dramaturgical theories and practices bring communities together. The purpose is to articulate the way that in which autistic people gather and engage for

performances, be it the relaxed physical setting of the Autism Arts Festival, or the online participation-based performances of Flute Theatre brought on as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I shall argue for the ways in which quirky dramaturgy forms communities through these spaces as a means of connecting autistic people together outside of the need for neuronormative notions of socialisation. Community building creates a far greater effectiveness in growing advocacy movements and allowing autistic people to mobilise together. I will show that festivals and digital mediums allow autistic people to share and talk about their experiences in open safe spaces that encourage and welcome their autism, while also providing autistics with agency in terms of the degree of engagement they wish to have with other people. This means both the form and shape of that interaction and the understanding of social engagement under these contexts as functioning like a dramaturgical practice – which means dialogue and structure can be curated in ways that are reflective of autistic sociability.

Festivals and curated artistic online spaces are both important conduits through which autistic people might come together to discuss and engage with issues or enjoy a piece of theatre, providing access to performances for many autistics who cannot access physical theatre spaces because of access, financial or geographic restrictions. Quirky dramaturgical practices and the ways in which communities are engaged through performance events can result in better physical access by starting to provide access to theatrical productions for those who might not normally be able to see them. I will showcase the fact that arts institutions and the access policies that they employ will be more inclusive and elastic with engagement and feedback from the communities that they are providing access for. This will create a more robust and democratised way of ensuring performance events are autism friendly and safe by making the autistic theatregoer an active producer in the sort of theatrical experiences they want to participate in. This means, for some, that digital theatre such as *Pericles* is a much more appealing notion, more so for autistics who suffer from severe social anxiety or find physical theatre spaces stressful, overstimulating and triggering.

Communities are an essential part of quirky dramaturgical theories and practices, with decisions made to ensure relaxed and flexible spaces for autistic people. I will demonstrate that autistic people are the underpinning focal point of quirky dramaturgical approaches, with the role of autistic communities being to foster a relationship between performer, audience and producer. To this end I will argue that communities within quirky dramaturgy, can take on the role of a dramaturg and be active participants in the ways that the performance event is experienced. Quirky dramaturgy and the practices of the Autism Arts Festival and *Pericles* situate autism rights discourse on a larger international scale, so that others might mobilise in other nations in order to seek reform in their native countries. Quirky dramaturgy, as shall be shown, is a useful advocacy tool as people share methodologies and practices, therefore leading to refinement of artistic and access related endeavours seeking to champion the lives and rights of autistic people.

5.1: Quirky Communities

Communities are an important part of how we as human beings develop relationships – fostering bonds and connections with people who share a common aspect or interest. From living in the same town or city, to one's identity, or a hobby people have a shared interest and passion for, communities help in giving us a sense of belonging and a sense of our place within the world. Neal Carnes writes that:

> Communities provide the forum for how we perceive our place in the world. As such, communities offer us a sense of belonging, a place to retreat as well as a means to act up, thus change society. For society, communities serve as the building blocks, they are what bind us to the larger world.[267]

Communities are for Carnes a lens through which one positions themselves within society. Communities offer something reassuring and familiar, bound by aspects of commonality that

[267] Neal Carnes, *Queer Community: Identities, Intimacies, and Ideology*, (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019) p.121.

connect us and the world around us. But most importantly communities rise to the challenge of creating change when people unite, mobilise and find voices to advocate and educate on issues important within those communities. What fundamentally makes a community important to quirky dramaturgy, is that it emphasises the diverse range of neurological identities that exist beyond a more specifically focused group. In particular, within the context of quirky dramaturgical practices, the ways in which autistic sociability is framed and structured fundamentally underpins a community as quirky. Quirky dramaturgy structures communities in such a way as to understand the needs and perceptions of its community members, and, rather than being framed around a neuronormative understanding of engagement and interaction, these communities instead cater to and work in tandem with neurodivergence. Within this chapter specifically we shall delve into the ways in which engagement, interaction and access all play key factors in the ways in which autistic people engage with one another, artists and access providers to create an interconnected means by which autistic theatregoers can interact in manners best suited to the autistic mind.

What makes a community fit within the theory and practice of quirky dramaturgy is the underpinning concepts that inform the queer community. For Carnes, 'Queer's contribution to community centres on its core tenants of fluidity, diversity and non-normativity. Unlike many identity-based communities, queer is expansive rather than restricted to one key feature.'[268] An important and fundamental aspect of what makes quirky dramaturgy important to the ways in which neurodivergent people might interact and engage with one another is that it is made up of many different people who neurologically identify in a number of ways. This means an embedded allyship for different neurodivergent people whom might have different needs but are mobilised around neurodivergent self-advocacy and support. Community, for a quirky dramaturgical theory and practice, is a collection of different neurodivergent people coming together to find the spaces that best suit their needs and the sorts of people they feel that they relate to the most. In this regard

[268] Ibid., pp.121-122.

quirkiness branches into the way that Carnes views queer communities, because rather than focus on one singular aspect, it instead emphasises the diverse neurological spectrum that we live on.

A community within quirky dramaturgy is a collective coming together of people to form safe inclusive spaces. These places that might be considered social hubs, such as performance festivals or curated artistic online spaces, are vehicles through which autistic communities can form. When quirky dramaturgy is engaging with communities, the autistic individual is not just a member of a group of people, but also an engaged activist and producer of quirky dramaturgical practices that seek to propagate the need for access and to support reform for autistics. Festivals and curated artistic online spaces allow autistics from across the world to connect, discuss, socialise, and enjoy the camaraderie and belonging that one might find within a community, but also to examine and share strategies, discourse and the broader social and cultural issues autistic people outside of the UK might face. The ways in which autistics seek to communicate with one another and the spaces in which they might choose to convene and meet in, be it physical or digital, speaks to the ways in which flexibility is framed in quirky dramaturgy to ensure clear signifiers for how willing each person is to be social. Autistic people can have difficulties with regard to social skills and interpersonal relationships defined as such in the neuronormative way. Theatre has been shown to be a useful way of allowing autistics the means to learn and develop those skills in a manner that allows them to explore and experience art that caters to their sensory and kinaesthetic qualities. Thus, theatre and performance are a highly important part of the ways in which quirky dramaturgies are developed, because it provides not only a safe inclusive social space, but also allows autistics to communicate in a manner that is comfortable and makes sense.

5.2: Festivals and Community

Festivals enact the dramaturgical function of organising people and arts practices within communal spaces. Jing Li and Danièle Moore write that there are three core elements present within the ways in which festivals and community engagement produce discourse within such spaces. For them:

> these (inter)cultural production practices actualize[s] (1) festival participants' pursuit of civic and political action, (2) 'connected civic learning' (Ito et al., 2015) and intercultural citizenship experiences, as well as (3) enabl[ing] community residents to become critical cultural designers and producers[269]

For Li and Moore, there is a civic agency that manifests from these cultural engagements that seek to turn the theatregoer into an activist and thereby directly impact the cultural frameworks through which we might examine and experience life both within the theatre and outside of it. Therefore, by placing an emphasis on the community members within the festival setting and the cultures that they might generate – putting the focus on a sense of civic responsibility to help fellow community members. This can also mean having community members engaging and feeding back their experiences of the festivals that they take part in as an intertwining dialogue between producer and theatregoer, ensuring continued development and improvement of the experience of the performance events for those who attend such festivals.

For the Autism Arts Festival, we might see such a means of community engagement occur in a number of different ways that help shape the overarching autistic rights discourse that radiated throughout the entire festival. The Friday of the festival was aimed towards professional development of autistic artists and their practices – offering professional advice and support to those who attended the workshop. Throughout the Saturday and Sunday, activists and academics such as Hamja Ahsan and Paul McGrath gave talks on books and projects they were involved with, which allowed audiences the chance to engage with critical theory and disseminate knowledge on the matter. The festival also values audience feedback on the event, and seeks to ensure that autistics have agency over the access being provided and have direct input and feedback on what worked, what did not work, and why and how the arts impacts and influences their lives. This

[269]Jing Li, Danièle Moore, '(Inter)Cultural Production as Public Pedagogy: Weaving Art, Interculturality and Civic Learning in a Community Festival Context' *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Vol.20 (January , 2020) pp.375-387 (p.376)

showcases the ways quirky dramaturgy sees the role of community and the individual in relation to engagement with one another, not just as an interpersonal endeavour, but as a wider cultural discursive task which seeks to create activists and producers as well as community members.

Tristi Brownett and Owen Evans write that:

> Given the austerity measures of the last decade in Britain and the documented impact of widening inequalities on health and well-being across the life course (Marmot, 2010, 2018; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011), it could be argued that arts and cultural festivals have an enhanced, and important, role within community settings by seeking to create inclusive spaces for the kind of casual social contact during communal arts engagement that can help build trust (APPGAHW, 2017). They have the potential to help the development of mutual and reciprocal connections within communities for the benefit of all.[270]

Brownett and Evans posit the idea that festivals, and more broadly the arts, have an important function within communities in creating both access and spaces for people to engage with one another and allow for the development of interpersonal interaction. Hence, they argue that such a dynamic extends beyond the sociological – having benefits that ensures that arts festivals serve not just a cultural purpose, but an important health and wellbeing function as well. These healthcare benefits extended more so within the contexts of quirky dramaturgical practices – ensuring the protection of and catering to autistic access needs. Ear plugs and fidget spinners both provide sensory relief in different manners, be it through stimming or the blocking out of loud, overstimulating noises. Meanwhile, colour coded stickers are used to signify willingness to engage socially. In providing these sorts of inclusive spaces, engagement amongst autistics is encouraged in a way that is not framed through neurotypical social frameworks, but rather in manners that feel more comforting and understandable to autistics. This resulted in a willingness to engage, and open

[270] Tristi Brownett, Evan Owens, 'Finding common ground: The Conception of Community Arts Festivals as Spaces for Placemaking' *In Health and Place*, Vol.61 (November, 2019) Article 102254, p.5.

mic nights during the festival provided a light hearted way of audience members engaging in the performance culture of the festival if they so wished in a relaxed, supportive atmosphere. I personally took part in an open mic comedy night on the Saturday evening of the festival, and found myself the next day having people come up and tell me how much they enjoyed my set. It is these moments of community building and interaction with one another that festivals can foster and encourage. In this sense, although the performances are what gathers people together, it is also the shared sense of being autistic that unites us – wanting to share or see others share. Seeing the same few people at every show you attend over the weekend, interacting with festival goers, having people blog or document their time, is all part of the broader festival-going culture that encourages a sense of togetherness. The that way festivals are framed and how they interact with communities and form new ones is important because it speaks to the need for understanding the social access that one might provide at performance events. Providing safe relaxed spaces to interact in as an autistic person with no need for masking is imperative for quirky dramaturgy as it looks towards the future and the ways in which activism might create access and opportunities within the arts for autistic people. Mobilising against the neuronormative structures that frame and dictate not just autistic access, but the ways in which we should be engaging and interacting is imperative to understanding that a community, within quirky dramaturgy is a mobilised group of likeminded autistics, alongside other disabled and neurodivergent people across the spectrum of neurological differences that exist, that through activism and critical engagement might seek to topple neuronormative structures in place of more inclusive ideas of disability and neurodivergence, both culturally and socially. Brownett and Evans share this sentiment, writing that festivals:

> further emphasizes, and potentially activates, available community assets such as opportunities, people and places, or it might positively influence how the community perceives itself or the future. Arts and cultural festivals should therefore not be considered utopian, elitist or exclusive, but seen instead as a key to unlocking community assets, especially when they are conceived and designed as events to attempt to bring local communities together in open and accessible spaces

and places within the locality. This is because festivals produce, and liberate, creative spaces that animate these assets, allowing the community to perceive of itself and the available spaces differently. [271]

Brownett and Evans stipulate that festivals impact communities by creating new resources which people can make use of. Festivals might need workers to assist at the festival, festivals themselves need artists and speakers, and the performances and events create new social hubs for people to gather around, socialise and interact. Festivals are, for Brownett and Evans related to the communities they are engaging with or have engaged with. Therefore, for the Autism Arts Festival, we might look at the ways in which access is provided to the autistic community and how the autistic community gives feedback on access and personal experiences at the festival as part of a relational developmental process seeking to optimise access to resources and opportunities. Effectively gaining feedback and responses from those whom you are providing access for can lead to more robust access making strategies that can make experiences and spaces that can best be of use to the autistic community. This means that, as Brownett and Evans put it, 'arts and cultural festivals can create common ground between individuals and groups that might not otherwise meet.'[272]

5.3: Autism Arts Festival and Community Mobilisation

The Autism Arts Festival was a manifestation of the community and ally led projects that sought to create safe spaces for autistic people. *The* Autism Arts Festival began in 2017, and 2019 marked the second gathering of autistic artists across the UK coming together to present work in various artistic mediums: from music, film and theatre, to stand-up comedy, alongside lectures and long table discussions. Any future instalments have yet to be announced, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic and no updates from the University of Kent, the festival's future is uncertain. The festival prided itself on the feedback it received from artists and audiences – seeking to ensure the most inclusive

[271] Brownett, Owens, Article 102254, p.5
[272] Ibid.

and enjoyable time possible for the many autistic spectators that descend on Canterbury for this festival. Within Ben Fletcher-Watson and Shaun May's 2017 report of the Autism Arts Festival, they highlight the fact that it 'was an attempt to develop the idea of a relaxed performance further to create an entire festival that was as autism-friendly as possible.'[273]. There are ongoing peer reviews that take place, ensuring a continual development of the ways in which the festival going forward could cater to the needs of its audiences. By placing the power of access and spectatorship in the hands of audiences who have a direct input, it gives autistic audiences the agency they lack within mainstream performance. Here we see the manifestation of a more grass roots relaxed performance movement that emphasises the continual dialogue of producer, performer and spectator in creating accessible and diverse performances that can best showcase that autism is a spectrum. Also, being a festival emphasises a collective social experience over the duration of the festival, as opposed to one singular performance event. This means within the context of a relaxed festival a wide-ranging number of works and projects that create an open and accessible space for neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences without shying away from creative, challenging and radical pieces of work. As the programme for the festival makes clear:

> where some festivals take the approach of removing anything in the show/film/artwork that might be challenging, we work on a principle of informed choice: The website will have detailed information about each event, including possible triggers and sensory information, so you can make an informed decision about whether or not to attend it.[274]

The Autism Arts Festival had a clearly implemented policy that was consistent in how spaces were made accessible for autistic audiences, which they implemented through creating a relaxed and flexible theatregoing culture for the spectators and artists attending the festival. A key and distinct

[273] Ben Fletcher-Watson and Shaun May, 'Enhancing Relaxed Performance: Evaluating the Autism Arts Festival', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Performance*, Volume 23 (May, 2018) pp.406-420 (p.407).
[274] *Autism Arts Festival Programme* (Kent: University of Kent, April, 2019) p.3.

example would be the emphasis on the waving of hands up in the air as a substitute for applause more commonly found in mainstream theatre spaces.

For The Autism Arts Festival, there was a dialogue being engaged with – a means whereby performers are making the work they want to, spectators are seeing work that they feel best meets their access needs, meanwhile more wider ranging access alterations to the Kent University campus created a broader sense of relaxedness. These include the turning off of all hand dryers within toilets for the duration of the festival, as well as free audience packs that included ear plugs, and a series of stickers to highlight to the festival goers your openness to social engagement. Green for wanting to talk, orange for wanting to talk to people in your social group only, and red for not wanting to engage at all. There were also two stickers to identify if you were open to physical contact with other people, i.e., hugging, and a sticker to indicate if you were comfortable having your photo taken. Fidget spinners were also freely given out, and performances freely encouraged audience members to stim during the performance, with a number of shows also incorporating dedicated stimming breaks into the show – allowing audiences to have time to just focus, relax and find simple pleasure in the act of stimming.

A core aim for the festival was to ensure that a non-judgemental space could be created that could freely encourage autistic behaviours. As Fletcher-Watson and May point out, 'A key aim of the festival was to create a space in which people felt they could stim – that this behaviour was not just 'tolerated' but celebrated.'[275]This aim of the festival, that of freedom of expression as an autistic person, is emulated by Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Charlotte Brownlow and Lindsay O'Dell, who write that 'The purpose is not to develop social skills for face-to-face (NT-dominated) environments, but to offer a challenge to the need to 'fit in' to the NT world.'[276] Fletcher-Watson and May reiterate this point by laying out the two dimensions at play at a festival such as the Autism Arts Festival,

[275] Fletcher-Watson and May, pp.406-420 (p.408)
[276] Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Charlotte Brownlow and Lindsay O'Dell, 'Mapping the Social Geographies of Autism – Online and Off-line Narratives of Neuro-shared and Separate Spaces', *Disability and Society,* Vol.28 (September, 2012) pp.462-475(p.375)

firstly, to open 'up the arts to people who might otherwise not be able to access them', and secondly to challenge 'the grip that NT space has on the art world and its institutions, and creating a space with the potential for autistic identities and advocacy narratives to emerge.'[277] At its core, *The* Autism Arts Festival sought to position the relaxed setting as a means to both disrupt and challenge neuronormative spectatorship models and open up the arts to many autistic individuals who beforehand found more conventional or mainstream spaces inaccessible. In bringing people together to engage with artists and each other in an open and socialised setting such as a festival, what begins to happen is the ability to freely express autistic traits – meaning that perceived atypical traits become a political act of defiance against neuronormative rhetoric.

This emphasis was seen in the programming of the event and helped to further clearly communicate the aims of the festival. Fletcher-Watson and May develop that:

> The potential for advocacy mentioned above was realised most concretely in the programming of the festival, which included work by autistic self-advocates such as Paul Wady, Annette Foster and Katie Fox. These artists among others, shared work that directly address the politics of autism from a range of perspectives.[278]

Having a diverse and wide-ranging number of works, alongside the policies of informed choice already brought up in this chapter, positions the autistic spectator as an active agent in their own theatregoing experiences, while also allowing artists the freedom to create a wide-ranging variety of works that best create a diverse spectrum of work that is reflective of the diverse spectrum of people who have autism. In using relaxed performance as a framework for performance making, as opposed to performance adaptation, relaxed performance can serve to be a useful practice for making new work that caters to autistic audiences and can even be used to educate neurotypical audiences on autism.

[277] Fletcher-Watson and May, pp.406-420 (p.410).
[278] Ibid.

Findings from Fletcher-Watson and May's 2017 Autism Arts Festival report emphasise both the inaccessible nature of mainstream theatre spaces, and how important the arts are for this particular group of autistic people. In doing so, it paints a picture of the importance of the arts for autistic people and the sense of community it can create and mobilise around itself. 66% of those asked either agreed or strongly agreed with the notion of the arts being central to their life, with 69% feeling that there are not many opportunities for autistic audiences to see theatre.[279] Further still, 85% believed that shows should be changed to be accessible for all.[280] The research done at The Autism Arts Festival was useful at not only seeing how autism self-advocacy generates accessible spaces and radical and exciting work, but it also highlighted the absolute failure of mainstream theatre to adequately provide chances for autistic people to engage with the arts. And although Fletcher-Watson and May admit that 'these statements are obviously not comparable to the views of the wider population, having been presented to a self-selecting cohort with an identifiable interest in culture', they do emphasise that 'they do provide useful data on the opinions of contemporary autistic spectators.'[281] The Autism Arts Festival showcases just how important the spaces it provides are within the current cultural climate for autistic audiences. *The* Autism Arts Festival evoked just how serious the inaccessibility to theatres has become, and that dedicated festivals like this seem to be the only real chance autistic audiences get to feel like their needs are being catered to. But it is also important to understand just how effective the event is, and this is down entirely to the creative and critical discourse all at the festival are constantly engaging with. As Fletcher-Watson and May writes:

> Audience response to the festival suggests it was broadly successful in its core aim of making an event that was accessible to audiences across the autistic spectrum, with 100% of respondents saying it was either 'accessible' or 'very accessible'. To achieve this, we implemented a range of

[279] Ibid., p.413.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid.

> measures including detailed show information with potential triggers, social stories, colour communication badges, chill-out spaces and an audience pack that included a fidget toy and ear protectors. While not all audience members used these, this is unsurprising considering the heterogeneity of the autistic spectrum, and following the practice of autism led events such as Autreat, the emphasis of this suite has been to facilitate self-regulation."[282]

These findings from Fletcher-Watson and May attribute these factors of commonality to the feedback process of the festival which allows for autistic self-regulation that in turn allows organisers and audiences to be producers of the sorts of events they wish to experience. The intersection of access creation and audience feedback into the ways that access was implemented articulates the means through which a quirky dramaturgy makes autistic communities active agents in their own access requirements, and ensures, through open lines of communication, that others within the community might feel safe to experience and enjoy live performance as well. Quirky dramaturgy's engagement with communities is a progressive mobilisation of policy change that ever expands outwards – looking at the wider macro issues of access that impact the daily lives of autistics. Thus, sharing experiences and ensuring the experiences of others in the safety of relaxed spaces is fundamental to a growing, healthy community and self-advocacy-based model for autistic rights.

In putting the power of how access might be shaped and how performances might be experienced at the feet of the communities that access aims to serve, festivals allow autistics to become active agents in the production and development of the quirky dramaturgical process. The Autism Arts Festival was styled as an autism friendly, relaxed festival aimed at celebrating autistic artists and theatregoers. In those settings, interpersonal communication is encouraged and framed through colour coded signifiers of social engagement. Here, people have the freedom to engage and talk to one another in ways that encourage autistic sociability. The show and the aims are expressly

[282] Fletcher-Watson and May, pp.406-420 (p.413).

about reconnecting and discovering new ways to communicate. And while quirky dramaturgy is about the ways in which autistic and other forms of neurodivergent art can create atypical experiences representative of those lived experiences, allyship can be an important part of reaching outside of groups and communities, and in those instances, it is imperative to understand and directly engage with allies or those you provide access for. In these moments of connection and coming together, the aim of *Super Autie Gang* might be seen as an attempt to bridge the distance between neurodivergent and neurodiverse people and be a means of bringing both together. While there are some who posit the idea that those safe spaces might only be effectively constructed when constructed by autistic people, I feel this does not adequately represent the issue. It is indeed true that large arts institutions within the UK do not effectively provide effective theatre access – stopping many from accessing or experiencing live performances they might otherwise wish to engage with. However, I feel it is far more productive to say that the quirky dramaturgical theories and practices laid out within this thesis provide an effective means of providing truly safe autistic spaces. In this sense autistic people are invaluable as our experiences and expertise can ensure spaces and performances are safe.

5.4: *Super Autie Gang* and Community Advocacy

The Autism Arts Festival allowed for this approach to community engagement to take place by making autistic people visible participants on and off the stage. Annette Foster's *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang* articulated the core community led goals of the Autism Arts Festival via its intersectional approach to autistic experiences that sought to create overlap, and share lived experiences, all within a communal safe autistic space. Foster's work is an effective parallel to the digital manners in which performance might come to form and be used by communities, and showcases how these online engagements might spill over or become organised within a physical theatrical setting. *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang* explores and shares the experiences of autistic women and those who identify as non-binary, using participation-based theatre and

verbatim elements to articulate the ways in which Foster and their co-performers navigate and experience the world as autistic people. Annette Foster, speaking of the aims for her show, writes that:

> My goal was to allow SAG performance collaborators (which I will refer to as co-performers) to embrace the awkwardness, chaos, messy and unorganised nature of being autistic itself in performance. The aim was to develop a new neurodivergent aesthetic that embraces difference, that encourages autistic people not to 'mask' or 'pretend to be neurotypical', that is accessible to all in any capacity to participate and is respectful of autistic culture[283]

The intent by Foster is aligned with the practices of quirky dramaturgy, with their intent of using a neurodivergent aesthetic that helps create spaces and opportunities for autistic people to freely express themselves without fear or anxiety of neuronormative rhetoric.

The show abides by the dramaturgical frameworks of which one might deem as 'relaxed', ensuring that the performance event itself is friendly and accommodating to the needs of autistic theatregoers. This was done through stim breaks, more relaxed technical aspects, alongside the sensory protection for some audience members such as ear plugs that the Autism Arts Festivals provided. The show itself began with a preshow, with two of Foster's co-performers asking audience members a quick survey before sitting down. If audience members answered to being autistic to the co-performers, they were congratulated, while if they answered they were neurotypical, they were coldly given a sticker with 'neurotypical' written across. Foster explains that:

> this was to flip the labelling of autistic people by clinicians and society around so that autistic people are enthusiastically encouraged and invited into the space and neurotypical people are given a label to wear[284]

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[283] Annette Foster, *'Autistic [Neuro]Queer Pioneers' Using participatory autism research, performance, and visual art to articulate the experiences of late diagnosed autistic women (cis- and trans-) and non-binary people* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kent, April 2021) p.239.
[284] Ibid., p.246.

The show began with Foster and their co-performers walking on stage, acting out each what they think a neurotypical walks like. This was done in a rather tongue in cheek comic manner by recreating the famous opening scene to the movie Reservoir Dogs. Foster explains that:

> The aim of the autistic walk and stimming on stage was to celebrate the Super Autie Gang and our 'autisticness' and a way to show autistic pride, rejecting the neurotypical walk and the tendency to camouflage our natural walk or mask who we are, to fit into a neurotypical world.[285]

Foster and their co-performers however decided how they were walking was not working for them, and so they instead begin to walk how they would normally walk as autistic people. Foster explains that, 'we decided an autistic walk would be more free, less stiff and include some toe walking.'[286] This walk involved a variety of different ways of being, with wearing of ear defenders, stimming and toe walking, as they all freely expressed their identities as autistic people.

One of the performance's most striking moments is Foster's performance of her letter to Simon Baron-Cohen, all the while doing yoga. Foster explains that;

> The letter is a crucial part of the performance as it sets the scene by rejecting the hegemonic stereotype that autistic people were usually male and/or male brained. I reject the pathological paradigm and embracing the Neurodiversity paradigm with my personal story written as a letter to Simon Baron Cohen[287]

Foster achieved this by using the letter as a way to talk about being autistic and a woman, using the moment within the performance as a means of bringing out into the open those parts of herself often masked, an act many autistic people know all too well. This is compounded when during their performance of the letter while assuming a yoga position, they stop, turn and address the audience, talking about how they are still masking because they are assuming the role of an actor who must

[285] Ibid.,p.253.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.,p.256.

learn their lines for a theatre performance, despite the fact they struggle to learn lines. One of Foster's co-performers comes on with a script, and assumes the role of prompter, whispering in their ear the lines when needed. This moment of care is inherently quirky, and speaks to the care and access theatre should give to autistics, while also speaking of the communal care and support autistics should show one another. Foster believes that:

> This was an important point to make about the representation of a neurodivergent aesthetic, that it would allow for accessibility for the co-performers as well as the audience and that this 'support' can many times be peer-to-peer support.[288]

This leads into the final aspect of this performance I wish to describe, which wholly emphasises Foster's belief in peer-to-peer support and showcases the way community impacts the performance making practices of quirky dramaturgy. As audio of one of the co-performers plays, explaining how when they were younger, they used to lick plates, the performers are all given plates and act out the manner of licking the plates that the voice in the audio describes. There is a sense of communal spirit and togetherness as the group all begin to lick, and after the enactment is completed, the other performers all begin to recount their own stories, which are then acted out by Foster and their co-performers. For Foster:

> These stories are ways in which the participants bonded and as they saw themselves in these stories, the 'strange' and 'weird' things they do that have been pointed out to them their whole lives now had context, they were now 'normal' within this autistic society[289]

These acts of performing stories of autistic people, living out their lived experiences, makes visible the perceptions of autistic people in the face of neuronormative rhetoric, neuroqueering it and positioning autistic experiences as just as valid as neurotypical experiences. Autistic communities are a fantastic way for autistic people to find validation in their identity and how they behave, giving

[288] Ibid.,p.259.
[289] Ibid., p.276.

them a sense of belong outside of the alien world of neurotypicals. Foster sees 'excavating these autistic stories provides a way to build autistic identity, culture and community',[290] and by shaping the way we as a community of autistic people share our experiences through performance, we create spaces of free expression, freedom, and provides a chance to celebrate being autistic.

The show has a beautiful sense of togetherness that comes from the sharing, listening and encouragement Foster and her co-performers show for one another, with this communal sense of autistic lived experience amplified by its placement within a performance festival organised for autistic theatregoers and artists. Annette Foster highlights this fact, writing that:

> It is important that the views and personal narratives of autists be heard and valued by professionals to make the definition more accurate, inclusive, and authentic. […] Only when their opinions and views are respected will we create a positive, holistic concept of autism that is beneficial to their community. We need a more inclusive view of the neurodivergent and to move from 'deficit' to the celebration of difference. [291]

The Adventures of the Super Autie Gang is a crystallisation of the broader socio-political aims and motivations of the quirky, and emulates and puts into practice neuroqueer perspectives that allows the performance to come together. The importance of making heard the voices of autistic people and having their experiences heard is fundamental in challenging academic and cultural misconceptions about autistic people and creating a more understanding society towards autism. To this extent, it is not just a performance, but a live physical hub wherein quirky dramaturgy allows communities to come together to enjoy and express themselves. Jacques Rancière asserts this notion of community, writing that;

> Because living bodies on stage address bodies assembled in the same place, it seems that is enough to make theatre the vehicle for a sense of community, radically different from the

[290] Ibid.,p.278.
[291] Ibid., p.40.

situation of individuals seated in front of a television, or film spectators in front of projected shadows.[292]

Rancière sees the liveness of the theatre as core to its formulation as a communal event. Actors addressing audiences, but also, audiences responding back to the actor on stage in an ongoing dialogue that disrupts potential ideas that an audience must be a silent witness. Caroline Heim develops this by proposing that 'individual audience members become a form of community through ensemble performances, dialogue in the theatre, and through bringing "practiced" behaviours into the theatre house.'[293] Heim argues that community is evoked by the audience when the role of the audience is performed to other audience members. These 'practiced behaviours' however do assume a certain neurological state for the spectator, and the understanding of these behaviours and the social script of the audience member. Therefore, might quirky dramaturgy become part of a new 'practiced behaviour' for neurodivergent people to freely express themselves and their identities? Might a new way of expressing and investing, of interacting also create a new potential paradigm of the formulation of community in theatre? And what are the potential stakes of failing to perform the role of the audience member?

The answer is that as communities grow and develop, performance evolves and develops with said communities to be reflective responses to the change. Foster's performance and collaboration with female and non-binary autistics is a responsive articulation of this point as autistic communities find allyship within queer communities and those long since excluded from autistic academic discourse find their voice to speak out and express their identities. Quirky dramaturgy articulates and communicates experiences that exists outside of a heteronormative social framework, imagining ways of communicating and expressing those experiences both within and outside of the autistic community. By breaking down and reconstructing the way we communicate

[292] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans, Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2011) p.16.
[293] Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty First Century (*New York: Routledge, 2016) p.112.

and express in manners that afford both access and support to autistics who find the neurotypical world strange and confusing, we bring greater visibility and understanding to the lived experiences of autistics without affording the problematic dialogues neuronormative cannibalisations of autistic identity have created. Petra Kuppers writes of ways to destabilise the cannibalised autistic stories, arguing that;

> By destabilising the founding story, we fight for entry into the realm where new meaning can be founded at the same time as we continue to be suspicious of founding stories and their exclusionary effects. And it is our loss of certainty, our anxiety, that allows for new community to come into being, in being-together and in joint expression.[294]

Kuppers, argues for the ways storytelling can destabilise the predominant mythologies and forge new tales free of the exclusionary aspects of the past. Quirky dramaturgy, and community performance, are the destabilising factor within the neuronormative hierarchies that oppress neurodivergent and disabled people. Kuppers continues that;

> When we as a group engage our local myths, we do so with an agenda and a tactile sense. We substitute the dominant myth, but the act of substitution creates new anxiety and liminality, new impossible desires for wholeness and plenitude, a traumatic of political art labour.[295]

Kuppers raises the point despite these changes and challenges to dominant and exclusionary narratives, new tensions will arise. Hence the need for continual expression and performance of new narratives and stories as one might negotiate and make communities come together to understand one another and provide safety. As Kuppers puts it, 'the origins of the fantasy are clear, an investment in the local, in the everyday.'[296] The fantasy of the performance and the art of storytelling, specifically in the case of *The Super Autie Gang*, the storytelling of specific autistic

[294] Petra Kuppers, *Disability, Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.84
[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid.

experiences outside of the mainstream heteronormative perception of autism, is rooted in the everyday lived experiences of the autistic performers. And its placement within a community driven theatre festival setting brings to the surface these ways of destabilising these exclusionary dialogues and provide and celebrate safety for those who want their voices heard.

The intersection and performance of autistic lived experiences by Foster and her co-performers within the setting of a festival underscores the ways within a quirky dramaturgical practice that people become active producers. This process of active participation and production of performance draws visibility to autistic lives both in relation to their experiences but also their physical presence on stage. Hence, within the context of the Autism Arts Festival more broadly, we might understand the underlying theme and motivation being visibility of autistic bodies and experiences. The visibility of non-performers, or rather community members turned performers in the aid of Foster and her performance project, highlights the importance of lived experience and autistic visibility within quirky dramaturgy, treating autistic people as human beings with love, care and respect in contrast to being objectified and fetishized the autistic individual, (Such as *All in a Row's* Lawrence puppet in Chapter 2). This means understanding the ecosystem of audience, artist and producers that make up performance festival, and how quirky dramaturgy might bring together autistics to detangle the neuronormative languages and anxieties placed upon them. Kuppers writes of these tensions of performance and disability and how they come to manifest as therapy. For Kuppers;

> These issues of 'performing' versus 'being' are central to the public evaluation of disabled performers. The tensions surrounding the body in culture. On the one side, disabled performance is seen as therapeutic – the relationship between body and performance is unproblematic, performance is an 'opportunity' for disabled people to discover themselves as 'whole' and 'able'. The focus is inwards: aimed at the disabled person doing the performing, not the wider community. The performance can be seen as performance: challenging dominant notions about

> 'suitable bodies', challenging ideas about the hierarchy between disabled people and (leading) non-disabled people.[297]

Kuppers here presents the ways in which public performance of disability is presented and perceived via a linkage between the body and art, shaping meaning through the embodied experience of the artist in an insular, inwards manner. In this first side of the performing versus being debate, Kuppers argues for performance to be a useful personal tool to deal with lived traumas or issues a disabled performer might find, but does not reach out beyond that towards the community. On the other hand of the debate for Kuppers;

> disabled performance can be seen be seen as performance: challenging dominant notions about 'suitable bodies', challenging ideas about the hierarchy between disabled people and (leading) non disabled people. Here, disabled performance is seen as a political intervention, aimed at the whole community.[298]

Here, Kuppers proposes the non-hierarchical anti-normative approaches lead to the greatest amount of community engagement due to framing performance as an intervention within othered communities, examining presentation and expression of one's self and the visibility of othered bodies. This approach is a much more productive and inherently quirky approach in its non-hierarchical, intervention-based framework geared towards the ways audiences might form communities, communities become audiences, and how both can become political activists in the wider issues surrounding autistic people. For the *Super Autie Gang* and its placement within the festival setting of the Autism Arts Festival, it very much articulates this point. In the gathering of autistic people within a site aimed at celebrating autism, ensuring safe accessible spaces and experiences for those who might not find safety elsewhere. The festival and performance spaces that take a similarly inclusive hands-on approach to ensuring autistic accessibility are in intervention

[297] Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Routledge, 2003) p.56.
[298] Ibid.

into the broader access failures within institutions that specialist festivals must exist to provide access that should be more readily available nationally across the UK. *Super Autie Gang* crystalized the ethos of the Autism Arts Festival perfectly by having autistic lived experience at the centre of the festival, encouraging audience members to become active participants. In challenging the neuronormative ways in which autistic people are expected to behave in favour of frameworks that are distinctly quirky, welcoming and catering to autistic perceptions of the world, the Autism Arts Festival showed different approaches to interacting with one another and thinking about the ways autistic people can communicate with one another.

5.5: *Super Autie Gang* and Festival Ethos

This intersectional approach in relation to community and performance interaction by Foster illustrates the ways in which performance might be used for advocacy and self-expression on the part of the theatregoer. *Super Autie Gang* correlates with the direct audience feedback that the festival organisers received from audience members, which showcases the aims for the performance and the festival interlock – that is to say the festival gave autistic theatregoers a voice and agency, allowing autistic people to give feedback on performance events and become active producers and dramaturgs. Visibility is a fundamental part of Foster's practice, with her *Aucademy* page describing how her 'ambition is to collaboratively explore creative autistic self-advocacy by producing art with the workshop participants that aims to dispel stereotypes, in order to make autistic women, non-binary and trans people more visible.'[299] Likewise, the Autism Arts Festival lays out the two aims of the festival on *Disability Arts Online*. It writes that:

[299] 'Annette Foster' *Aucademy,* https://aucademy.co.uk/annette-foster/ [Accessed 03/05/2021]

> First, it is an attempt to develop the idea of a relaxed performance further to create an entirely autism-friendly festival. Second, it is intended to be a celebration of autistic creativity with a range of works by people on the spectrum[300]

What *Super Autie Gang* does is articulate perfectly the core principles of expressing and showing the diverse range of autistic identities that exists – of breaking down the neuronormative rhetoric surrounding the autistic individual and turning performance into advocacy.

Jen Harvie, writing about the *Edinburgh Fringe Festival*, notes that the underpinning ethos of festivals is 'understanding participation as being a meaningful opportunity to engage in the event, whether through performing, being a member of an audience, or otherwise.'[301] The Autism Arts Festival achieved this ethos through both engaging with and compiling audience feedback, as well as through direct engagement with open mic events, performances that directly engaged with audiences through direct participation or lived experience, and a system of social traffic lighting via stickers to create an accessible and sociable environment for theatregoers and artists. Under these conditions, wherein the festival setting provides direct engagement between audience and performer in an intertwined festival culture, work shifts, changes, and risk taking and more unconventional theatre making strategies take prominence. As Harvie states:

> Opportunity persists, in other words, for audiences to see and performers to make unusual, precisely non-standardised work. And risk persists. Despite pervasive attempts to control performance-for example, discursively, through reviewers' and marketers' categories, physically through venue restrictions, and temporally, through scheduling constraints-determining whether work will be 'good' or 'bad' maintains a high degree of unpredictability.[302]

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[300] 'Autism Arts Festival at University of Kent's Canterbury Campus', *Disability Arts Online*, Events https://disabilityarts.online/events/autism-arts-festival-at-university-of-kents-canterbury-campus/ [Accessed 03/05/21]
[301] Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) p.74
[302] Ibid.,p.92.

Harvie paints a picture of festival settings that create a difficult to control or read body of work wherein the feedback loop of audience and performer pushes artists to create more and more interesting or unconventional pieces of works to stand out from the vast body of other performances that take part in festival settings, more so, in large-scale, mainstream festival spaces such as the Edinburgh Fringe. But community engagement and the ways in which an audience might respond to a piece of work, or how an artist might seek to create unique experiences for theatregoers, evokes a dramaturgical dialogue that is most certainly at work within the Autism Arts Festival. Audience feedback, alongside the ways in which access might be used artistically and creatively to create autistic theatrical experiences that feel more focused towards autistic audiences, results in a more flexible means of providing effective access and support to people with autism. The Autism Arts Festival*'s* existence outside the mainstream calendar of UK performance festivals allowed for it in some senses to escape the more commercial mainstream festival frameworks such as the Edinburgh Fringe, meaning the Autism Arts Festival was a much more direct community led event. In this regard, as Harvie writes, this 'may provide opportunities for transgressive, anti-capitalist behaviour, as when they find ways of offering free events, or of maintaining variety and choice in a market which appears to favour simplification and repetition.'[303] Specifically within the contexts of The Autism Arts Festival as opposed to the more mainstream festival events such as the Edinburgh Fringe, The Autism Arts Festival situated itself as oppositional to neuronormative rhetoric.

Harvie's examination of the potential anti-capitalist behaviours that one might exhibit at a festival as large and mainstream as the Edinburgh Fringe raises the questions of how this analysis might relate to smaller niche performance festivals that do not have the resources and scope comparatively. The Autism Arts Festival was framed as an autism friendly space for artists and theatregoers, but it also frames itself as a resistant force in the face of neuronormative rhetoric around autism. Each aspect of the festival, from the traffic light social system, to the autistic friendly

[303] Ibid., p.103

performances, imagines an autistic social framework and theatregoing experience that is distinct from traditional mainstream theatre productions. The festival comes to be a hub for autistics to come together and find safety and community in one another. Having spaces for autistics to reach out and meet new people who are also autistic, create friendships or creative partnerships, and find safety and freedom amongst other autistics, all underscores the strong community core at the root of The Autism Arts Festival. Because the festival is not mainstream and does not have the sheer scale of the Edinburgh Fringe, its more anti-capitalist and transgressive characteristics are magnified.

As a result, the access and artistic elements that define the festival as quirky, that is, the various aspects that seek to help provide comfort and security to the autistic theatregoers that attend: badges, fidget spinners, ear plugs alongside the material theatrical elements such as toned-down lighting and sound effects, stim breaks, and online streaming of performances. Alongside a more reduced programming compared to the extensive catalogue of performances at more mainstream festivals, the Autism Arts Festival felt stripped back and personal. All events took place within the University of Kent campus, with open mic events taking place within a campus café setting, all of which draw home the idea of The Autism Arts Festival being about the coming together of autistic people – giving a group of people who often feel isolated from accessing theatre spaces the chance to congregate and enjoy performance in safety amongst fellow autistics. The structuring of the festival seeks to get autistic people to engage with it and the performances it provides, and allow audiences the chance to be autistic without fear of neuronormative rhetoric othering and shaming them. Therefore, The Autism Arts Festival was a transgressive experience as it created a space that seeks to challenge the neuronormative frameworks that exists within traditional theatre spaces.

In this regard performance situated within a festival setting is always indicative on some level of the values and aims that festival organisers envision for the event. When those attending have input in the way it is experienced, we might therefore see that as a reflection also of the

community the festival reflects and represents. Quirky dramaturgy is an expression and communication of the values that the autistic community upholds in its advocacy and celebration of being autistic. Near the end of the performance, Foster kneels on the floor naked, markings etched across her body in bold black letters. These markings details labels and insecurities that many autistics understand and relate to as they deal with navigating a world expecting them to behave in a 'normal' manner. It is a moment that crystalizes the deconstructive nature of the festival perfectly, with Foster washing away the labels and languages that neuronormative society often makes autistic people embody. It presents clearly in a single moment the autistic body, visible on stage, breaking down the stereotyped tropes of the autistic individual – a recalibration of the languages of autism and how we embody ourselves, instead presenting the ways in which we choose to express our autism, in contrast to embodying one's autism in accordance with neuronormative rhetoric.

This moment within the context of the Autism Arts Festival was important for underscoring how and why quirky dramaturgy might communicate and engage with autistic advocacy. There is a deconstruction and recalibration of spatial logics too that ensures that spaces might be read and understood to be friendly for autistics. Foster presents a deconstruction of the lived experience of navigation and acceptance of one's autistic identity, examining the ways in which one might create and communicate more productive and healthy autistic dialogues. It is an ending to a performance that asks for us to open up and think about opening up to others, and placed within the festival setting of the Autism Arts Festival, the ways in which we might open up spaces to those who otherwise find them inaccessible. Foster's co-performers, who also take part to the extent they feel comfortable, provokes an image of an autistic community coming together to enact and share the ways in which they might feel safe. As audience members and members of the autistic community we are witnesses to that ethos coming to fruition both through the performance itself and in its reflection of the core values of the Autism Arts Festival

5.6: Streaming *Super Autie Gang* Online

Performances for the 2019 edition of the Autism Arts Festival were streamed online via Facebook as a means of opening up the festival and its performances to those who could not attend for financial, medical, or geographical reasons. This was in response to the 2017 feedback that asked for additional features theatregoers would like in future festivals. Fletcher-Watson and May write that:

> Stage 3 survey respondents were also asked about other access features they would like to see in future iterations of the festival, and two popular options were an online community to discuss arts events (62%) and live-streamed events so they can watch from home (48%). This suggests that a bespoke online platform for the festival might be beneficial for future years, and open up a whole new audience of autistic people for whom attending in person – with all of the stress that travelling involves – remains the largest barrier to access. [304]

This meant that the resultant streamed events from the festival are a direct response to audience feedback from the previous iteration of The Autism Arts Festival. The streaming of Foster's performance via social media platforms fundamentally underscores the idea of performance as a hub that communities might mobilise around, with platforms such as Facebook allowing people to connect with friends and family and form or join communities and groups. It is an online space that functions as a means through which people might communicate with one another without the need to physically meet them. In seeing these moments of autistics revealing themselves to their audience, we see the ways in which performance reaches out to the communities it represents. It also speaks to the overarching access-based discourses that The Autism Arts Festival and *Super Autie Gang* engaged in – examining the ways in which performance can open up beyond the theatre building to provide access to those who cannot see live performance due to access, financial or

[304] Fletcher-Watson and May, pp.406-420 (p.418).

geographic restraints. This serves the twofold purpose of more people seeing performance, but for artists like Foster that wish to reach out and increase autistic visibility, curated artistic online spaces allow for autistic performance to reach more people, thereby educating and inspiring audience members.

Importantly for Foster and her project, they are sharing and educating to a wider group of people the experiences and challenges of cis and trans women and those who are non-binary that are also on the autistic spectrum. For The Autism Arts Festival, willingness to change and engage with the feedback of the needs of the audience is an imperative part of highlighting the importance of policy that is framed through the needs of the community. A quirky dramaturgical practice understands the atypical and embraces non normative performance making frameworks to create work which is reflective of the ways in which autistic people see the world. A community can be seen to be a dramaturgical practice that is making autistics the producers of performance through the access or frameworks they wish to engage with. Experiences of the autistic audience member and performer provide greater visibility and agency to autistics to put the power of access reform in their hands and less out of the hands of institutions and governing bodies that have long since neglected or failed to understand the needs and concerns of those they are providing access for.

Quirky dramaturgy and its impact upon a community can be viewed as an approach to Community Based Participatory Research – seeking to reframe the ways in which research is compiled and undertaken, with the express aim of focusing on issues and concerns of the community. Dora Raymaker writes that 'CBPR is an approach to scientific inquiry that includes people from communities of identity as co-researchers in all phases of research that impacts their community, starting with deciding what to research in the first place.'[305] What The Autism Arts Festival did was ensure that community led responses to the events and festival experience can then

[305] Dora M. Raymaker, 'Shifting the System: AASPIRE and the Loom of Science and Activism', *Autistic Community and The Neurodiversity Movement; Stories from the Frontline*, Ed.Stephen K.Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp.133-145 (p.135)

be used to better produce a more enjoyable experience next time. If mainstream theatres and institutions took a more holistic approach to research and access, then inclusivity into theatre spaces would become much more robust and effective both in terms of application and policy.

5.7: Online Autistic Communities

What these changes and responses to feedback from The Autism Arts Festival articulate then, is how autistic communities have formed and how curated artistic online spaces have assisted in the imagination and creation of safe spaces for autistic people. These spaces function to produce a sense of community that is manifested through autism and the lived experiences of being autistic. Autistics online create their own jokes and memes that are responses to their autism – creating their own comic language that might seem atypical to those looking out. This spreads beyond autistic communities online, as a variety of different languages and means of expression are unique to many other online communities. People online can carve out their own spaces to mobilise, gather and talk with logics that are in opposition to neuronormative rhetorical approaches. To this extent this sort of community formation is shared with queer communities. Neal Carnes writes in relation to how Atlanta offers spaces for queer people that they 'share an identity and manifest this identity through a shared code of conduct.'[306] Autistic communities likewise create their own codified ways of talking and expressing that are manifestations of their identities, creating a quirky atypical forum that seeks to be oppositional to the oppressive neuronormative structures that erase and silence them. People connect and engage with access one might not find so readily at a theatre venue, which results in access to performances through the online realm of streaming, becoming the hub communities gather around. Carnes writes that:

> Community provides the forum for how we perceive our place in the world. As such, communities provide meaning to our lives. For individuals, communities provide meaning to our

[306] Carnes, p.120

lives, as well as a means to act up, thus change society. For society, communities serve as the building blocks – they are what binds us to the larger world. [307]

We might come to see communities as ways of people making sense of shared interests, identities or lived experiences, sharing stories and aspects of commonality in the pursuit of positive change. For autistic communities, there is the act of coming together as a resistance against cultural and social conditions that have long been hostile towards them. Theatre serves as a potent vehicle through which communities might find their voice through expressing and staging their lived experiences in ways that seek to empower and educate. Theatre is a means of political and social mobilisation that makes it an effective weapon in the arsenal of autistic activism. Community theatre has long since been an ever-present within the arts – connecting communities together, with the theatre becoming a hub and exchange of ideas and experiences. Therefore, for autistic people, access requirements and the longstanding issues autistic people have faced in relation to access to theatre venues either as audience members or as artists, means the online sphere can becomes an effective means of allowing access to performances one might not be able to see due to access, geographic or financial reasons. Although this should not be seen as some replacement for genuine and robust policy changes within theatre spaces, what the access to online performances does do is provide flexibility and choice. It provides theatre to those who cannot reach it, and it allows artists and theatres the chance to reach out and engage with a wider international community of autistics far beyond the boundaries of the UK. This allows for the organisation and creation of events physically as engagement and interest increases, it allows wider autistic mobilisation and it further continues to allow our voices to be heard.

Autistic communities have found massive growth within online spheres as the neurodiversity movement has grown, and so it is important for us to understand how quirkiness factors into the history of online autistic communities. From here we shall then discern and understand the

[307] Carnes, p.120

placement and importance of theatre and performance within this digital realm and the intersections of the two. *Autreat* founder, Jim Sinclair, writes that:

> I've been living with autism for 27 years. But I'm just beginning to learn about what it means. I grew up hearing the word but never knowing what was behind it. My parents did not attend programs to learn about autism, did not collect literature to educate schools about autism, did not explain, to me or anyone else, why my world was not the same one that normal people live in."[308]

The inception and founding of *Autreat* by Sinclair, a conference and retreat for autistic people, started a mobilisation of communities, with autistic people coming together. As our social interactions and relationships with other human beings becomes more and more transferred into the digital realm, with social media playing a prominent role in the way that we culturally engage and speak to one another. As such, Sinclair becomes an important bedrock with which to understand the ways in which autistic communities have grown, and how these communities take emphasise self-advocacy in the face of neuronormative rhetoric regarding their identities.

This involves autistic people making their own work and spaces. Karen Leneh Buckle argues that 'Events for autistic people that are organized by NTs can be autistic-friendly but they will never be a truly autistic space'[309] And while this is true in terms of understanding quirky spaces which are manifested to suit the neurodivergent person and their access needs, it is likewise important to understand that allyship is key in both bridging gaps with other communities and others who will advocate alongside us. And while gatekeeping spaces via some baseline of neurological otherness that may or not be openly expressed is deeply problematic, these anxieties pervade and persist because of the neuronormative histories that plague autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy is a means

[308] Jim Sinclair, Quoted in, Sarah Pripas-Kapit. 'Interpreting Jim Sinclair's "Don't Mourn for Us": A Cultural and Intellectual History of Neuordiveristy's First Manifesto, *Autistic Community and The Neurodiversity Movement; Stories from the Frontline* Ed. Steven K.Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp.23-39 (p.31).
[309] Karen Leneh Buckle, 'Autscape', ed. Steven K. Kapp, *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp.109-122 (p.118).

of welcoming in those who feel othered by our neuronormative society, and it is important to use events or spaces that others might use to facilitate on our behalf to mobilise, gather and be quirky. This is not to say that mean we should leave others to advocate on our behalf, but to understand, in our advocacy and community building the importance of intersectional approaches that widen and mainstream autistic issues and discourses and inform and educate. Buckle proposes that:

> Quite often we have been told that we ought to have web forums instead of or in addition to the email list we provide for social interaction of participants between Autscapes, but doing this properly would require more of our tech people then they have to give right now, when they have other priorities and demands on their limited capacity.[310]

Digital spaces like forums might therefore be seen to be a useful part of the autistic advocacy movement in so much as it takes pressure off of organisations and charities to do this. That being said, the digital potentialities of autistic sociability and community building seems to be somewhat underplayed here by Buckle. Social media and online forums have become spaces where autistic people might gather and share their lived experiences as autistics. One example given by Foster is that 'On Twitter and Facebook, the hashtag #actuallyautistic has been adopted to let people know that you are an autistic person, you have a voice and that you exist.'[311] Online spaces have come to become a place to gather together as autistics away from neurotypical spaces and neuronormative rhetoric, and just be autistic. Instead of email lists, online spaces like Reddit have provided autistic people a space to congregate and share their experiences. The autism subreddit has over 240,000 members, and Reddit itself provides interconnecting bridges with other communities and groups in other subreddits. Within the subreddit, autistic people share their day to day lives, their special interests, and memes poking fun of life as an autistic person and neurotypical people. The subreddit also has people share their 'coming out' stories of autism and struggles with mental health, and the

[310] Karen Leneh Buckle, 'Autscape', *Autistic Community and The Neurodiversity Movement; Stories from the Frontline* Ed. Steven K.Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp.109-122 (p.120).
[311] Foster, p.52

subreddit provides support and words of encouragement as autistics band together.[312] All of this is a prime example of the imperative importance of online spaces such as Reddit, Twitter, YouTube and so many other space, for autistic people to connect. As more and more people interact and engage with one another online, so will the size of online forums and spaces for autistic people to share and talk. For community building and quirky advocacy going forward then, we must look towards digital spaces to connect, mobilise and organise.

Digital activism within online blog communities present ways in which autistic people might come together to oppose neuronormative rhetoric. The internet has created easy and open access to information for many people within democratic nations and as such puts the power upon groups, communities and activists to bring to the wider public issues facing autistic people. As the neurodiversity movement has grown online – with neurodivergent communities growing and mobilising, and with forums, blogs and social media providing a space for discourse regarding autistic issues to take place within – people are more aware of the concerns of autistic people. Breaking down barriers of disinformation and pseudo-science in these spaces is important for ensuring and protecting autistic futures and for striving towards progressive policy changes from governments and organisations. Online engagement has created social connections and interactions in manners that more readily cater to, and are aware of the needs and anxieties that an autistic person might face when it comes to physical engagement and all the encoded ways of behaving that come along with it.

These online means of communication open up dialogue between access givers and autistic theatregoers and/or artists. For The Autism Arts Festival, this manifested through the use of audience feedback to assess the success of the festival, examining the aspects of the festival that might have succeeded or failed using audience feedback as an effective means of providing better experiences at future events. Events from activists and scholars like Hamja Ahsan and James

[312] 'r/autism', *reddit.com* https://www.reddit.com/r/autism/ [Accessed 22/09/21]

McGrath mean that the agency of the spectator exists beyond feedback – making them actively engage and learn about autistic rights discourses and how to use it. What the festival experience and feedback strategies of The Autism Arts Festival emphasised is the ways in which festivals allow for communities to directly engage in the sorts of theatrical experiences they would like to enjoy. Festivals, then, are an effective and useful way in which to allow audiences to engage in quirky theatrical practices – placing the power in the communities they represent. Quirky dramaturgy is flexible to the needs of the individual and understanding and caring towards those perceptions of the world. It is about being seen and making the lived experiences of the autistic theatregoer key, while emphasising autistic subjectivity.

If we look at the *Super Autie Gang's* performance in relation to its placement within The Autism Arts Festival, we might understand the framing of autism and queerness by Foster as the moulding of those experiences of female and non-binary, the aim being to frame their perceptions and experiences as literally centre stage of the discussion. Foster emphasises and draws attention to the neuroqueerness of herself and her co performers within a festival that is structured around safe autistic spaces and autistic self-expression. In the setting of the Autism Arts Festival, there was a safety in exposing and making visible one's vulnerabilities and anxieties about the world in a place that understands and empathises with them – a community as a support network. The feedback the festival receives and the ways performances are developed and adapted accordingly with the needs of the community evokes an important dramaturgical methodical approach fundamental to quirky practices. Martine Kei Green-Rogers writes that:

> When leading a discussion that incorporates potentially sensitive subjects, a dramaturg should view this as an opportunity to learn how the theatre's constituents view these issues, as opposed to succumbing to fear and anxiety.[313]

[313] Martine Kei Green-Rogers, 'Talkbacks for "Sensitive Subject Matter" Productions: The Theory and Practice', *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Ed. Magda Romanska (London: Routledge, 2016) pp.490-494 (p.490).

Green-Rogers argues for the importance of a dramaturg to gain feedback and ensure theatregoer agency when navigating sensitive issues – seeing this as an opportunity for the dramaturg to gain invaluable insight into the ways in which audiences feel about these matters. Especially for a quirky dramaturg, it is important to understand the ways in which the communities they might engage with are reading or being read – being diligent in ensuring consideration has been made for the voices of those people. As seen with The Autism Arts Festival, this advocacy-based model of theatregoing and audience feedback is an effective way of giving power and agency to the autistic theatregoer, something they do not feel to have within more traditional theatrical settings.

5.8: *Pericles* and Autistic Communication Online

Flute Theatre's online performances of *Pericles* as a response to theatre closures during the COVID-19 pandemic are a prime example of the ways in which quirky dramaturgy manifests these new ways of communicating within online performance settings. It is in this global pandemic that new ways of communicating and socialising have had to be sought. This extends as well to the ways in which neurodivergent and learning-disabled people might connect and engage with one another during a global pandemic, and the social and healthcare related impacts of thinking about creating ways to interpersonally engage that are reflective of neurodivergent brains. This involves a number of quirky approaches to community engagement and outreaching to autistic people, their families and carers. *Pericles* by Flute Theatre is a prime example of just this sort of quirky thinking. Performed and streamed from the homes of the performers, each separate show sees one actor perform in front of a digital room of autistic children. These rooms have audience members digitally taking part with actions and sounds as the digital sphere becomes the hub wherein performer and audience might engage with one another from home. This adaption of the early modern play takes a distinctly participatory approach, emphasising games and the audience's engagement with those games, video feeds of both audience members and actors allowing a distinctly direct connection for both despite the physical distance between the two. Each performance has the actors perform to an

autistic child and their family, with the small-scale audience within this online setting creating a distinctly more intimate experience as actor and audience members engage through the games. The emphasis here within the performance is that of distance and how curated artistic online spaces might connect and bring people together. Structurally, the performance places focus on the individual autistic spectator and their family, and the series of performances also lays out ways forward and how we might think about digital performances creating communities and bringing them together.

Flute Theatre's practice is structured around a technique called the 'heartbeat method', a means of creating work for autistic audiences which was developed by Flute Theatre's artistic director Kelly Hunter. Hunter explains that iambic pentameter is 'essentially the rhythm of the human heart.'[314] Hunter develops that 'Having autism can feel like an extended panic attack so we use the steady heartbeat of Shakespeare to alleviate the panic.'[315] Shakespeare is framed by Hunter as a means through which to help relax and make comfortable autistic people through the use of iambic pentameter, allowing for them to feel less anxious by providing them care and support. This approach means that the use of text and structuring it around the performance games that occur during performances, is designed to reflect a means of communication and expression that an autistic spectator might feel more comfortable and relaxed engaging with.

Kelly Hunter explains the origins of the 'heartbeat method' and how it came to be, writing that:

> I took myself off to the Glebe school, a special school in Beckenham and offered my services to teach Shakespeare to people with no access to the arts. I gave myself the task of creating ways to use Shakespeare so that it lived, wholly and completely in the moment, for the people engaged in it. The school welcomed me with open arms. "You can play with anyone here, except those

[314] Kelly Hunter, Quoted In, Miriam Gillinson,' 'We use Shakespeare's heartbeat': lockdown theatre for autistic audiences', *The Guardian, Lockdown Culture* (17th June, 2020).
[315] Ibid.

> children" they said, pointing to a closed door, "because they have autism, and they won't be able to play". I did play with those children. For an hour once a week, every week for three years and little by little they taught me how to play with them. I never missed one session. Some struggled to make eye contact, and some struggled with articulating their thoughts and feelings. I focused on alleviating these struggles through creating games, which were short, fun, and easily repeatable, requiring only the human voice and body and another person to play with. These sensory games derive from moments in Shakespeare's plays where he invented his 'loving eye' and his 'seeing brain'. Moments of genius. The rhythms of the iambic became a soothing means of transition, with the collective repetition of heartbeats at the beginning and end of every session. During these "Heartbeat Circles" everyone involved seemed to become calmer.[316]

One of the key responses from Hunter's recounting of the inception of the 'heartbeat method' is that through the use of Shakespeare and iambic pentameter, autistic children felt more open to communicate and express themselves. In assuring environments that promote relaxed and flexible approaches to care and support for autistic theatregoers, Hunter and Flute Theatre aim to create a dialogue that gives autistic children the freedom to express themselves.

The 'heartbeat method' of Hunter uses a gamified performance structure to achieve their aims, with Hunter explaining that:

> The games are comprised of three stages: demonstrating, playing and sharing. First, the actors demonstrate the game inside the circle and the children watch. Next, everyone gets up on their feet and the actors pair up with the children, spreading around the room to play in pairs or small groups. Finally, everyone returns to the circle and each pair or small group share their game for the rest to watch[317]

[316] Kelly Hunter, 'The Hunter Heartbeat Method', *Flutethetare.co.uk*, https://www.flutetheatre.co.uk/hunter-heartbeat-method , [Accessed 27/01/23].
[317] Kelly Hunter, *Shakespeare's Heartbeat* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015) p.7.

This three-stage framework evokes a communal structure of sharing, making their autistic audiences feel comfortable and safe to engage and express themselves, firstly by allowing them to play and explore alone or with a small group, then coming together to show their work, and encourage and celebrate their creativity. Hunter writes that:

> These drama games are sensory, physical and fun to play. They are created to heighten the children's awareness of themselves and provide an opportunity to explore emotions, which may otherwise be overlooked.[318]

There is a distinct sense of relaxedness that Hunter's 'heartbeat method' evokes through this central aim, as by providing games that autistic children feel comfortable engaging with, the framework and structure of the games can assist in making them feel more confident in expressing themselves. The intent is to work alongside and compliment autistic perceptions of the world, so to allow them to flourish within

Despite this, the 'heartbeat method' also needs to provide a degree of flexibility towards how it engages with autistic theatregoers. Hunter points out that:

> A certain amount of trial and error is inevitable when you initially play these games; the scope of difficulties is so wide across the spectrum that not every game or strategy will prove beneficial for every child. The games are not theoretical ideas; rather they are tried and tested techniques invented by playing with children, creating games around their individual personalities and unique traits of autism. Ensure that you take your time to discover the children's specific needs, experimenting with your approach until you find something that begins to challenge the child's particular communicative difficulty.[319]

There is an ethical imperative in understanding the needs of the children, and how best the games used can accommodate those needs and make them feel safe. Hunter speaks of a clear line of

[318] Ibid., p.1.
[319] Ibid.,p.8.

communication between artist and audience, which is central in providing the access and support that is needed to allow the 'heartbeat method' to be effective. One must not try to impose a neuronormative approach of using theatre games as a means of trying to 'normalise' autistic children, but rather help them find the ways to be themselves, free of judgement. The 'heartbeat method' is an intersection into communication and performance that allows for communal self-discovery to be made possible.

Robert Shaughnessy expands upon this point, writing that it 'offers a regular and, importantly, repetitive and predictable structure within which synchronized behaviour, and thus the beginnings of communication and interaction, can take place.'[320] Shaughnessy himself is well versed in the practices of Flute Theatre as an advisory committee member for the theatre company, as well as his son Gabriel with fellow theatre scholar Nicola Shaughnessy, who is a creative associate. Gabriel is autistic and working with Flute Theatre has been hugely beneficial to the ways he communicates and expresses himself.[321] A prominent theme in Hunter's method is sharing language to better understand one another, for children to express themselves and for parents to understand their child, which can create better understanding. This also expands to the creative process of devising and creating work as well, with Gabriel Shaughnessy attending Flute Theatre rehearsals to play. Robert Shaughnessy explains that Gabriel's presence enhanced the work within the rehearsal space, explaining that, 'Gabriel's really beautiful and distinctive way of playing was all of a sudden changing what was happening, the work itself became deeper and richer in really unexpected ways'[322] Flute theatre's practices then are engaging with autistic people within the creative process to create work that best reflects autistic experiences, helping them improve and enhance their work. This results in the 'heartbeat circles' that Flute Theatre's performances are structured around,

[320] Robert Shaughnessy, ''All Eyes': Experience, Spectacle and the Inclusive Audience in Flute Theatre's *Tempest*', *Shakespeare: Actors and Audiences*, Ed. Fiona Banks (London and New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2020)pp.119-137 (p.123).
[321] Robert Shaughnessy, Quoted In, 'The Company', *Flutetheatre.co.uk*,
[322] Robert Shaughnessy, Quoted In, 'Gabriel', 'Participants Gallery', Flutetheatre.co.uk, https://flutetheatre.co.uk/participants-gallery/gabriel/ [Accessed 27/01/2023]

creating a sense of community and togetherness between audience and performer. For Robert Shaughnessy, 'The Circle thus creates the space for the phenomenon known to the cognitive sciences as entrainment, the fundamental mechanism whereby coordinated actions of the individual create a sense of group identity.'[323] This means 'heartbeat circles' aim to create a sense of togetherness that encourages engagement within the world of the performance.

Pericles Online is of particular importance in this regard, because during a period of isolation and anxiety during the COVID-19 lockdowns, having a means to express and communicate with others in a manner that feels safe, can help create a sense of group identity, helping them navigate a stressful, uncertain and potentially lonely period. Joanne Horsley, a teacher at St. John's College where Flute Theatre held a residency, writes on the website of Flute Theatre that:

> We had 30 performances of Pericles Online as part of a residency at St John's College Brighton. Each performance was unique to the individual and catered for their specific needs and communication style. The learners responded with great enthusiasm; enjoying the interaction and engagement with the actors, and joining in with play, singing, listening, sound, language, emotion and movement opportunities. It was a welcome break from the restrictions that had been imposed on them during lock-down, which had seen many of their freedoms curtailed and was resulting passive and withdrawn behaviours. The learners connected extremely well with the online format, and were quickly immersed into the world of 'faces'. It was a great privilege for each learner to have a bespoke one-to-one session, where actors could perform directly to them and make them feel valued and special"[324]

The purpose and intent of *Pericles* for Flute Theatre then is that of a means of reaching out across the country to autistic people and their families – presenting access during a particularly stressful and difficult time for neurodivergent and disabled people. The aim is to connect people together

[323] Shaughnessy, ''All Eyes'', pp.119-138 (p.123)
[324] Joanne Horsley, 'Pericles Online', *Flutetheatre.co.uk*, https://flutetheatre.co.uk/info-pericles-online/ [Accessed 22/09/21]

through performance and to articulate the ways in which art might be utilised to bridge divides and allow people to communicate and engage with one another through the use of Hunter's 'heartbeat method'. The online performance seeks to cater to the needs of the individual audience member who is engaging with the performance, and creates a dramaturgical feedback loop between both artist and theatregoer as the structure of the performance event alters to suit the access needs of each audience member who sees the show.

The show began with a performer introducing themselves to the spectator, performing a melodic introduction of themselves, after which they encourage the autistic spectator to also do the same. From here the performance takes the form of a number of different games that have been developed to represent the story of *Pericles* for autistic audiences. This is done in the game format by creating interactive scenarios within the performance that makes the autistic audience member a co-performer. The set-up of these games follows Hunter's 'heartbeat method' and focused on the kinaesthetic and sensory aspects of autism, and creates a performance that is both somewhat strange to view as a neurotypical, yet deeply pleasurable and enjoyable for those with autism. The online aspects of the show and the focus on coming together are important here because it situates the performance space as an open safe, communal site wherein free expression of one's neurodivergence is encouraged. The performance sees the autistic audience member engage with the characters in such a way as to make them part of the fiction of the performance world, and emphasises a kinaesthetic pleasure derived from their direct involvement in the plot of the show. The audience member takes part in battles, sea shanties, and conflicts with pirates, monsters and the elements as they undergo their journey.

The most striking aspects of *Pericles* is the use of vocal repetition and rhythms, drawing on the usage of echolalia to give a participation and sonic experience that is distinctly autistic. Melanie Yergeau writes that:

> embodied communicative forms-including the echo, the tic, the stim, the rocking body, the twirl-represent linguistic and cultural notions that pose possibility for autistics. Scholars have long argued that autistic people do not have a culture because they do not have a shared language, or any equivalent, to the sign language linguists and others have used to distinguish or legitimise deaf cultures. Autism is culturally and clinically juxtaposed against linguistic impairment; autistics don't do language, and if they do, they suck at it in some way (or so the logic goes) But if autism is an intentional standpoint-than autistic, embodied communication (whether sign or stim or tic) has the potential to reinvent what we think we know about rhetoricity.[325]

This is important because the idea of distance and reaching out into the digital space, is the implication of connection, language and communication which it brings. The way that the audience members for each separate show engages with and responds to the performances in a distinct way which is neuroqueer because it is personalised and rooted in the individual lived experiences of the spectator. The performances themselves are documented, archived and available for any and all to see, and the language of the autistic spectator becomes a time capsule of the ways in which we speak, articulate and communicate as autistics. It herein becomes an inherently quirky means of sharing and expressing the ways in which we as audience members and autistics process performance and enjoy it. Quirky dramaturgy and its engagement with communities, is built upon the foundational bedrock of communication and the ways in which the collective group expresses and shares ideas or interests that unite them and bring them together. Digital performances such as *Pericles*, although limited in terms of the scale of their audiences, showcases this point. That is to say, the ways in which quirky dramaturgy engages with audiences and language allows for the audience to come together and make their own dramaturgical interventions into the performance. The 'heartbeat method' allows for Flute Theatre to achieve this quirky dramaturgical element, with Shaughnessy writing that 'there is a deep organic connection between meter, the body, physical and

[325]Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Michigan: Duke University Press, 2018) p. 181

mental equilibrium, and healthy performance'.[326] This is amplified within digital performance, as the online space provides easy means of archiving performance events – allowing that dialogue to grow and evolve both from within the recorded performance and outside within the discourse or interventions that one might make into the performance with their spectating of the show. In doing so, *Pericles* connects more and more people together through the performance despite the distance between them.

The dynamic with performer and audience throughout the performance also articulates the means of which communication and language are formed. This is relevant in thinking about the placement of the performer in relation to audiences in these curated artistic online spaces and how they might serve as the vehicle for advocacy related discussion. The digital space that *Pericles* exists within articulates this meeting of the two. The online setting of streamed performances and works designed for digital spaces is an inherent part of the performance that helps connect people together. The interconnected global nature of the online world means a performer from one part of the world might perform to another. And for *Pericles*, the crux of the performances lies within this interconnected way audience members and actors are encouraged with the games, the smiles and excitement on completion of the tasks, alongside the performance having an engaging story. Moreover, having these performances recorded means that future autistic audience members might also watch and engage directly with the games as well. The way that we communicate and express ourselves as autistics is not always verbally, in fact a lot of autistic communication is non-verbal or sensory based. Stimming, echolalia, not making direct eye contact – they all make up a whole system of communication that autistics have that Flute Theatre uses to connect with audiences and enable communication in ways which move beyond traditional dialogue. Certainly, from a dramaturgical perspective, the performance of *Pericles* presents a methodology in line with Oily Cart in that the kinaesthetic qualities of the performance intersect with an emphasis on audience participation and

[326] Shaughnessy, ''All Eyes'', p.131

exploration. Access wise, *Pericles* provides autistic children the chance to access the theatre in ways that they might not otherwise have been able to get.

The ending of the performance adds to the connection of performer and spectator and situates moments of connection that resonate beyond the sphere of the online realm. Their performance with Kourosh is of particular note. Having taken part in the journey with Pericles, Pericles is reunited with his daughter Marina, both beginning to sing joyously. The feeds cut and Marina, having gone on this journey with Kourosh, begins to gently sing his name – creating a moment of connection and tenderness that is genuinely touching, the singing and the usage of camera cuts communicates more than more conventional dialogue conventions could. This echoes a very touching description by Shaughnessy about what a Flute Theatre's work means for him, his wife and son when they attended a Flute Theatre production of *The Tempest*. Shaughnessy writes that:

> Watching, as a parent, our profoundly autistic son engaging in one of the many activities – happy playing Shakespeare, after his fashion – that, after diagnosis we never dreamed he would access, the clouds part to offer a glimpse of a somewhere where things are otherwise; the place where we lived before we knew he was autistic, before everything changed.[327]

The 'heartbeat method' employed by Flute Theatre to construct games engages autistic audiences in Shakespeare and provides a means of accessing early modern performance, more so for autistic people who struggle or outright cannot communicate in more neurotypical manner. These moments are a perfect example of examining the ways in which, more broadly speaking quirkiness and the digital intersect in formulating performance events that inform the ways in which we connect with other people. While the quirky is interested in the atypical ways in which art and culture might be experienced counter to neuronormativity, it is also fundamentally about bringing people together. For many, access can often be a barrier to effective mobilisation and the bringing together of autistic people. Therefore, what might this moment of connection, of singing by Marina to Kouroush be

[327] Shaughnessy, ''All Eyes'', p.134

relevant to this discussion? Simply put, technologies and the ways in which we engage with the world are becoming increasingly digitally focused, and theatre has likewise become more digitised with streams and recordings raising debates around the liveness of the performance event. But performances designed specifically for the online sphere, like *Pericles,* create work that is not inherently adaptive of some already existing work available to audiences, but rather create new quirky art with the aim of engaging autistic theatregoers. We can see this likewise in the issues with how relaxed performances frame autistic friendly shows as adaptations rather than creating new work that was designed for such a dramaturgical framework. Ergo, these moments of connection, I argue, hit home the importance of work made with autistic sensory traits in mind, and that this work online can be the access point for many autistics. It is through the online performance that we might intersect and build towards mobilising against policies that have problematised the position of the autistic artist and theatregoer. While access might prove a barrier for many to the theatre, online we might instead manifest our own ways of making and seeing work. We might intersect in these moments of connection and begin to join a wider advocacy network that seeks to improve theatre access in the UK.

Flute Theatre utilises the technological aspects of the online performance well in creating dynamic access tools for autistic audiences within the streams. Throughout the performance, audience members have the freedom to mute, turn off screens, and alter and change the way they view and experience the performance in a way to suit their access needs. This is important because of the unique access challenges one might face when creating performances online for autistic audiences, sensory triggers, duration, potential epileptic triggers from staring at a computer screen for too long. This dynamic – involving the ways in which theatre might be accessed or indeed how autistics might connect to watch performance – is likewise shown in the separate performances for Lydia, Gregor, Gabriel and Izzy. Instead of the previous dynamic of experiencing performance from home, here the audience members sit within a black box theatre. These four instances of the performance have the spectator and a carer sit within a circle. The optics of this framing of the

performance are fascinating because they construct an ephemeral, live experience of being within the theatre watching the performance, while likewise viewing a performance staged and performed from separate locations. This is an imperative point to raise in underscoring that these performances should not be seen as direct replacements to the live theatrical event, or that access should not be continued to be provided and improved upon.

This approach can also be seen in *Pericles* – using its digital technologies within the online streaming format to afford new ways for audiences to engage with and think about how they want to experience access and performance. Ilinica Todorut highlights that, 'The spectator and his or her agency and participation are often at the centre of performances fostered by digital technologies.'[328] What is key to learn from this point is that as we face a global pandemic, giving people a sense of agency in their engagement is imperative to ensure some degree of control and comfort during a time of great uncertainty. Choosing how we might engage with one another and performance is important as well for the autistic spectator, who has to navigate their autistic sociability in a cultural setting othering to such outlooks, meaning artistic curated spaces neuroqueer neuronormative understandings of human social interaction. The digital setting of the performance affords the chance for stake free social engagement that places agency on the audience member of when to opt out if the performance gets too much. Digital performances help in this regard with access options such as muting the show or blanking the screen and listening to the performance, creating flexibility in the ways relaxedness can be implemented. This means that there is more flexibility in the ways in which a spectator might choose to experience or adapt the show to meet their own personal needs. This means that, as Todorut develops:

> The telematic viewer too can be a so-called emancipated spectator, watching a performance happening on screen, while having the option if he or she so desires to exchange impressions

[328] Ilinca Todorut, 'Dramaturgies for the Digital Age', The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy, Ed. Magda Romanska (London: Routledge, 2016) pp.495-499 (p.499).

> with other remote spectators and with the performers via chat. The conditions for fostering an emancipated spectator are not to be found in the affordances and limits of a specific medium, but in the thoughtfulness accorded to form and content in performance works across media. Comprehensive definitions of theatre might be less important than encouraging a versatile, challenging practice across representational media.[329]

We might afford such flexibility to how the autistic spectators for *Pericles* might choose to experience the performance both within or outside of their own homes, alongside the technical access afforded by viewing an online performance as being both flexible and neuroqueer, because audience agency is placed at the forefront of the performances of *Pericles.* What is argued here is that theatrical form itself is less important than the range of ways in which one might choose to experience performance as an audience member. The diverse range of ways in which one might have to access and engage performance means that we might rethink performance methodologies when it comes to making work for autistic audiences. Digital mediums bridge this gap by forging bonds of community or by being spaces in which communities come to exchange ideas and interact with one another. The various different ways in which the audience members of *Pericles* chose to experience and engage with the performance are indicative of this very notion, that autistic access and the ways in which we create truly inclusive experiences come from allowing a plethora of access options to be made available if they are needed by the audience member. In this way we can frame and understand quirkiness as being about the people it seeks to bring together. The manner in which we do this is by making access and the ways in which we experience performance into community led dialogue that ensures agency and visibility.

5.9: Online Communication and COVID-19

This idea of visibility within *Pericles* is made more prominent due to the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The isolation many have faced as a direct result of lockdown and social distancing

[329] Ibid.

measures for the physical wellbeing of themselves and others has meant that people have had to find alternative modes of socialising and engaging with friends and loved ones. The pandemic has caused a large rise in mental health issues, and for neurodivergent people already navigating neuronormative society, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a difficult and traumatic experience. A study undertaken by Mèlissa C Allè and Dorthe Berntsen on the development of psychotic and cognitive disorders during lockdown shows that 'some individuals might be more at risk for experiencing psychotic symptoms and cognitive problems than others, namely, those who have few face-to-face interactions, rarely leave home, and have small living space per person.'[330] Allè and Berntsen argue that mental health is put at risk when the individual is isolated or lacks direct physical interaction with other people during lockdowns in the COVID-19 pandemic. Alle lays out that fundamentally, isolation during lockdowns can directly cause a number of psychotic or cognitive issues resulting from feeling cut off from the outside world and other human beings. These issues only become more dire for people who are disabled or suffer from mental illness, and, for autistic people, lockdown and isolation has had distinct impacts upon their lives.

A study done by Danna Oomen, Annabel D. Nijhof and Jan R. Wiersema, showcases the impact that the pandemic has had on autistic people specifically. The study found:

> an increase in depression and anxiety symptoms in response to the pandemic for both the non-autism and the autism group. However, this increase in symptoms and the impact of these symptoms on everyday life was greater in the autism group. Moreover, an overstretched healthcare system paired with social distancing rules meant that many adults with autism lost some, if not all of the support they received before the pandemic.[331]

[330] Mèlissa C Allè and Dorthe Berntsen, 'Self Isolation, Psychotic Symptoms and Cognitive Problems during the COVID-19 worldwide outbreak' *Psychiatry Research*, Vol.302 (August, 2021) Article 114015, p.6.
[331] Danna Oomen, Annabel D. Nijhof and Jan R. Wiersema, 'The Psychological Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Adults with Autism: A Survey Study Across Three Countries', *Molecular Autism*, Vol.12, Issue.1 (March, 2021) pp.1-21 (p.11).

Oomen, Nijhof and Wiersema pinpoints socio political factors that directly impacted negatively upon autistic people – creating an isolating effect that led to feeling more susceptible to depression or anxiety. The lack of support for them from support services and networks that might have assisted pre pandemic exacerbates this point – creating a distinct access-based issue. They propose that:

> the greater impact of the pandemic on the mental health of adults with autism emphasises the need for accessible, affordable (continued) support from health services to manage their mental health. Guidance may focus on the maintenance of a social network, and adjusting to rapid ongoing changes.[332]

With these issues autistic people have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further isolated from a society that often fails to accommodate access or support, the need to reach out, connect and provide help is of great importance. Curated artistic online spaces during lockdown have allowed people to continue to connect and socialise despite being unable to go out physically and see one another, and as such they present a vehicle through which we might engage with autistic people who might feel isolated, depressed or anxious. Live digital performance like *Pericles* provide the chance for socialising by allowing people to engage with performers through the performance games and participatory nature of the show. Oomen, Nijhof and Wiersema's study found that:

> of the participants from both groups who received guidance pre-pandemic from a qualified medical specialist (e.g. psychiatrists, psychologists, practitioners and therapies), 46% indicated sessions being cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. [333]

This meant that there was specialist care, support and treatment that autistics were not receiving during a time when such services were solely needed. Likewise, Oomen, Nijhof and Wiersema found that:

[332] Ibid.,p.15.
[333] Ibid.,pp.7-8.

> adults with autism that did report to receive support often indicated to prefer face-to-face support as soon as this was once again possible. Regarding online support, some adults with autism noted to experience anxiety on voice or video calls due to difficulties with the back and forth flow of social communication during calls, and would rather communicate via chat (i.e. text-based messaging) [334]

This data presented in the study emphasises the loss of access and support for autistic people during the pandemic, which as a result places a greater pressure on autistics, their families and carers in navigating an already uncertain period due to COVID-19 and lockdown measures. It also showcases that autistics found face to face engagements more comfortable and video calls to be a source of anxiety. From a dramaturgical perspective this is an interesting point to note as digital performances should therefore consider the ways video conferencing software can be utilised to put at ease such anxiety, or give them agency in how they wish to engage with the performance.

Theatre and performance can be an effective way of allowing autistics to engage socially through participatory and gamified performance methodologies that seek to make them feel that they are active characters in the story. Flute Theatre does this by using the interactive games that are used to tell the story of *Pericles* to create social interaction and engagement that does not force the audience member to follow a rigid social script. This means more freedom to express and communicate with the performers in the ways that they feel best suits them. The digital sphere then is an important vehicle through which people during the COVID-19 pandemic communicate, as our understanding of engaging with one another shifts and alters to respond to lockdown and social distancing measures. Streaming of theatrical productions and online performance provide a lifeline to the arts to those isolated away from it – providing access to past shows that autistic audiences might not have otherwise been able to see for access reasons.

[334] Ibid.,p.9.

This is an approach that is taken by Flute Theatre, with each performance done over the course of lockdown in the UK free to view on their website: an open resource for any and all who wish to access the performances. It is this open access approach to the archiving and documentation of online performances that provides an added degree of access and allows the opportunity for many to rewatch or enjoy the performances at their own pace. Unlike the ephemeral aspects of physical live theatre, online performance can take advantage of the tools at its disposal from streaming services to ensure a unique spectatorship experience separate from the physical theatre auditorium. This ensures a distinct difference in performance experiences and understands that both online and physical performances are their own entities, and should in no way be seen by theatres as licence to use recordings of shows as opposed to allowing access into those spaces for autistic and other disabled people. What it does mean is that the diverse ways in which we communicate and the ways in which communities are generated and mobilised around performance, alongside how important the arts can be to many in providing chances to escape and forget the difficulties faced in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in curated artistic online spaces that neuroqueer the ways we are expected to behave while also providing safe relaxed online spaces for autistic people to gather in.

Giving autistic people the forms of support and the social and recreational activities to engage in, helps in creating safer and more accommodating spaces within their own domestic lives when COVID-19 has disrupted the structure and familiarity of their normal everyday lives. Similarly, the focus on audience agency by creating effective access for autistic communities, is a sentiment that is also shared through the access and support for autistic people living through the COVID-19 pandemic. As Oomen, Nijhof and Wiersema write: 'the majority of adults with autism in our sample field find it important that adults with autism are being consulted for the development of COVID-19 pandemic tips and tools.'[335] This piece of information from the study highlights the wider access

[335] Ibid., p.8.

issues that autistic people face, which is complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance to make direct engagement with autistic communities to create effective solutions. Giving people the choice and the agency in the forms of access and support that they need is an imperative part of creating the most effective strategies and policies designed with the wellbeing of autistic people in mind.

The *'Theatre Access 2021 Survey'* lays out the climate of online access for disabled theatregoers and strategies going forward. The survey found that 'Around 3 out of 4 of respondents (76%) said that they would be less likely to engage with theatre online'.[336] This means that the survey highlights a general decreased lack of interest and engagement with online shows compared to shows within a live theatrical setting. However, '1 in 3 (35%) said that they would still consider things that they would not be able to experience in person.'[337] This means that 1 in 3 of the respondents to the survey would consider online performance in circumstances that stopped them from seeing the performance live, such was the case through two national lockdowns and isolation measures for those who test positive for COVID-19. The survey found that only '1 out of 4 respondents (24%) said that they would be more likely to engage with theatre online: 13% would pay, while 11% said they would only engage with free content.'[338] There is a primary focus on the desire for disabled people to engage with live instead of online performance which emphasises two aspects: firstly, that online performances should not be seen as an alternative to live performance and thus exclude those deemed undesirable, and that, secondly, online performances do not effectively engage and draw interest from spectators unless they are faced with extreme circumstances. Online performance here is framed as an adaptation of a live performance for viewership online, such as National Theatre at Home, but the survey fails to draw out the creative potentialities in the online sphere, by allowing audiences to democratise spectatorship in a way that

[336] Matthew Cock, *Theatre Access Survey 2021* (Manchester: Arts Council England, 2021) p.11.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Ibid., p.12.

allows for thousands of pieces of work to be shared online for free, creating wide reaching access and support for autistic people.

The survey found that '37% agreed or strongly agreed that they "didn't like watching live-streamed or recorded theatre online" 28% were neutral, 5% didn't know, leaving 3 in 10 (30%) who were positive about watching theatre online.'[339] These findings show a more mixed response to liking or disliking online performance, be it recorded or live streamed theatre performances. This is evident in the written responses of some of the participants of the survey. One respondent had a positive outlook on online theatre, saying:

> I think that having live theatre available has been a great development for those in the disability community. It has created access to many who may not be able to travel as easily or struggle with access. It's a shame that it took a pandemic to create more options to access theatre from your home, but would love for it to stay and be an option. [340]

This statement emphasises the importance that online theatre can have for autistic communities in engaging with theatre in relation to both issues around direct access and geographic limitations. It is telling that people see theatre within the online space as a replacement or middle ground for poor and inaccessible spaces that can be accessed by those who need it, but also emphasises the positive interwoven experiences it can forge for us autistic theatregoers alongside live performance. As another respondent within the survey says: 'For me, it is the LIVE aspect of theatre that makes it so special. To see the actors directly in front of you rather than in a small glass box.'[341] Therefore, it is important to frame and understand online performance as its own distinct performance making strategy that helps to enhance theatrical experiences and create new and interesting pieces of performance that do not seek to push autistic theatregoers away from physical theatrical spaces. Online theatre most certainly means autistic audiences can engage with productions if cost, access

[339] Ibid., p.13.
[340] Anonymous Respondent, Quoted in, '*Theatre Access Survey 2021'*, p.30.
[341] Anonymous Respondent, Quoted in, 'Theatre Access Survey 2021', p.32.

or geography is a factor for them – providing a valuable, flexible option. It can also lead to more international collaboration of performances that draw upon performers from all over the world, with it being performed online for a diverse international autistic audience that showcases that quirky dramaturgy reaches far beyond the boundaries of UK theatre.

5.10: Community, dramaturgy and policy reform

The Autism Arts Festival and *Pericles* both underscore the ways in which festivals and curated online spaces enact the dramaturgical function of shaping communities and audiences. Both have impacted in their own ways the continued development of arts advocacy for autistic people and calls for access reform within UK theatres. In this regard new technologies are useful as ways for communities to connect, and for researchers to compile research in pursuit of arts access reform. As Ilinica Todorut writes:

> The interactivity of new media has played its part in the active participation of the audience member. Virtual space and interactive video games offer new dramaturgical possibilities, while also drawing on and provoking the interactivity of the theatre event.[342]

These shifts in the ways in which we see digital space is important, because it is imperative to understand the digital as a tool in the repertoire of the quirky dramaturgies that one might create for autistic audiences. It is both a useful tool for getting audience feedback and likewise a means of thinking about the way that live performance is experienced. Here in particular we see the argument taking shape for the ways in which communication of ideas and issues democratise the dramaturgical process and the ways in which the performance event is experienced. Quirky dramaturgical approaches can lead to new ways of thinking about access both within the online sphere, but also within the theatre. This mean that, as LaRonika Thomas puts it:

[342] Todourt, pp.495-499 (p.498)

> These new digital technologies are also influencing the very notion of what dramaturgy (and theatre) is, and the possibilities contained in the two. What changes about theatre when it moves to a digital space, either part or entirely? Can we still call this type of performance "theatre"? Many theatre companies have a presence as an organisation of Facebook or Twitter. But some take individual productions into these platforms, creating Facebook pages for characters from their current productions or staging entire plays on twitter. While this is also certainly a marketing effort, with the ultimate goal to get audience members to the theatre to see the play, it is also its own performance. [343]

So digital mediums have already been mobilising participation with audiences outside of the theatre auditorium through social media campaigns for publicity and marketing purposes. But likewise, participation can take the form of access resources to assist autistic audience members in their visits to their theatre, or using curated artistic online spaces to create performances for them if they cannot directly access the theatre space. Digital dramaturgical practices are therefore effective in accommodating and assisting autistic theatregoers with struggles or difficulties that they might find in the social navigation of the neurotypical world. This means forming communities within a theatrical context is an effective means of creating spaces of autistic sociability that feel accessible.

Digital dramaturgical approaches then can be utilised as a means of utilising and mobilising communities to organise. Through the online sphere, autistics and allies might interact, engage and plan physical events that both celebrate autism and educate the public. Theatre is in this regard both a powerful hub and galvaniser for autistic event organisation and advocacy, and a way through which art might be seen to break down misinformation and misconceptions about autistic people. As such, the quirky dramaturgical practices of the digital sphere allow for autistics to relocate and manifest in curated artistic online spaces, neurodivergent realities, and worlds. From here autistics

[343] LaRonika Thomas, 'Digital Dramaturgy and Digital Dramaturgs', *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed.Magda Romanska (London: Routledge, 2016) pp.506-511 (p.510).

might come together to mobilise and organise to manifest the digital spaces within the physical world – creating festivals and events for autistics by autistics, canvassing and activism for autistic rights. Performance and spectatorship in curated artistic online spaces produce a melting pot of ideas and ways of interacting which we might then construct in physical theatre spaces. A community within quirky dramaturgy is a group of people deemed neurologically atypical, othered by the neuronormative structures that see them as in opposition to neurotypical hegemony. Curated artistic online spaces are a useful way for such groups to come together and imagine and share ideas of the future and educate and inform within the present in the face of disinformation and anti-scientific understandings of autism. Curated artistic online spaces allow for aesthetics and languages to develop in ways that allow those communities to communicate. Quirky dramaturgy is subversive – involving coming together with the common goal of autistic acceptance and support. Communities are mobilised in these curated artistic online spaces, in forums and on social media, and the arts can utilise this to their benefit to better understand the needs of autistic people within the theatre. And for the autistic people themselves that find safety and comradeship through being part of an autistic community, the arts are a vehicle through which we might express our identities and advocate for long term, systemic policy reform.

Festivals and the online sphere both provide autistic audiences the means through which to make an impact on the dramaturgical structure and formation of the theatre event. But these processes are also intertwined with the ways in which people might find safety and ownership of their identities within spaces that are made with them. The arts and the engagement they have with their audiences and the ways in which access might be altered in these instances speaks to the ways in which festivals and curated artistic online spaces provide the foundations for policy reform outside of the arts sector. The Autism Arts Festival and *Pericles* both ask different questions about access and how community is used and engaged with to ensure that quirky dramaturgical methodologies provide the effective changes in experience for the theatregoer. Active engagement

in the policies being shaped might help in the pursuit of more robust access strategies that are well suited to the needs of autistics.

An examination of the ways in which a theatregoer might formulate a dramaturgical collaboration with the dramaturg is an effective manner of thinking about broader collaborative efforts that can be made between industry leaders, the local community and institutional bodies in opening a clear line of communication between access givers, businesses and those who seek to access them. Specifically, within the arts, community led projects and initiatives that place the agency at the door of the autistic theatregoer create more accessible and diverse bodies of work. The Autism Arts Festival, for instance shows the ways in which a festival setting places autistic people at the centre of the access making strategies – using shows like *Super Autie Gang* as a manifestation of this ongoing community feedback. Visibility and agency are made to be at the core of the festival and the performances that it hosts. Broader collaborative efforts have occurred beyond just The Autism Arts Festival that articulate the point of collaborative community engagement as being able to create proactive policy changes.

The Autism Arts Festival and *Flute Theatre* are effective community based autistic performance experiences that position themselves as central hubs that autistic people can communicate through. This means using the arts as a way of mobilising and engaging communities – positioning direct engagement with autistic communities as the most effective way of creating autistic friendly spaces and experiences. This shift and focus on the ways in which festivals and the internet bring communities together can create dramaturgical collaboration such as the *Super Autie Gang* and *Pericles*. With autistic audiences in mind, these performances are friendly and artistically resonant with an autistic perception of theatre. They paint a picture of the access and creative potentialities that this quirky dramaturgical approach can have for autistic communities. This is in contrast to mainstream relaxed performances, that often adapt shows made with neurotypical

audiences in mind, not thinking enough about the dramaturgical form of the performance and how it might compliment divergent neurological perceptions.

5.11: Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which quirky dramaturgy and its features impact communities and welcome their presence and participation in the spaces and places of theatre and performance by responding to their unique needs. What previous chapters have argued is the importance of communities in creative and reformist endeavours to make safe, enjoyable theatrical experiences for autistic people. This chapter has examined the assembly of communities within quirky dramaturgy, and how they function critically and practically. I have, through my analysis of Annette Foster's *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang* and Flute Theatre's *Pericles Online*, argued that festivals and curated online artistic spaces provide unique performance making experiences for autistic audiences and provide the potentiality for communities to form around the performance event. The communities that take shape from these performance events become active participants in the dramaturgical processes that create The Autism Arts Festival and *Pericles Online*. From here autistics can come together to organise, mobilise and create work online that physically reaches a far greater number of people within autistic communities. Access and social engagement within these events allow for access to be thought about in regards to how theatregoers interact with one another – creating communities and support networks. For artists, this means increased access to performances for autistic people internationally – creating a broader reaching network of autistics that goes beyond simply the UK. Festivals and curated, artistic online spaces are the catalysts through which we might think of communities as quirky dramaturgical bodies interested in advocacy and the celebration of neurodivergent experiences, behaviours and art. Strong community and advocacy networks empower and make robust mobilisations for events, and puts pressure on institutions to make reforms to better accommodate for the access needs of autistic people. With many neurodivergent communities forming online currently due to the COVID-19 pandemic, quirky

art can be at the forefront of a new, ever-growing group of people online coming together to discuss and share their experiences as autistic people – allowing us to think about the ways in which theatre and performance are accessed and can reach autistic people across the UK and beyond.

These quirky dramaturgical practices are on full display in the ways in which the festival setting used by The Autism Arts Festival and the curated artistic online setting Flute theatre constructs dramaturgical approaches that focus on the community's agency, such as festival feedback, allowing audiences to experience the performance event as they see fit and provide suggested improvements for future events. This is imperative in constructing an effective self-advocacy-based model of access and policy reform, but also in creating work that is representative of the groups and lived experiences being staged within live performances. *Super Autie Gang* at the Autism Arts Festival crystalises this point in both the representation and staging of autistic experiences that are outside of the heteronormative mainstream portrayals of autistic identities, by placing an importance on visibility, safety and finding one's voice through art.

I have showcased, in this chapter, the link between communities and quirky dramaturgy – making the autistic individual into the core of the theatrical framework and situating them as a co-producer in the performance process. To this end *Super Autie Gang* and *Pericles* show how autistic spectators become dramatic extensions of quirky dramaturgical practices, which results in communities inhabiting the role of the dramaturg. Quirky dramaturgy therefore extends beyond a dramatic framework for making performance. It is also a means of promoting autistic self-advocacy and pushing for policy change for the betterment of autistic people. The ways in which a quirky dramaturgical theory and practice might be used is fundamentally about the ways in which people might access and experience the theatre outside of a neuronormative setting. Theatre, and the communities it creates and engages with, is at the very core of quirky dramaturgy. By applying a quirky dramaturgical approach to the way that we might experience live performance as autistic people, this chapter highlights the importance of autistic visibility. Giving voice to the autistic

community is important, and more so, it is imperative to understand as theatre makers, producers and dramaturgs, that the feedback and concerns of the communities they are representing should be central to their practices. *The* Autism Arts Festival and Flute Theatre present to us differing but equally important approaches to the way that quirky dramaturgy might be used in relation to communities. Access at present does not account for autistic voices within large artistic institutions within the UK. What these performances have shown is, that by giving autistic theatregoers the agency in the ways they engage with access and performance, it will create a more robust, diverse and effective access policy that benefits and celebrates autistic people.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the limitations faced by autistic people in accessing theatre in the UK, and has proposed a model of quirky dramaturgy that might expand and enhance the experiences of those autistic individuals. The thesis has elaborated that dramaturgy is a theory and practice that creates accessible pieces of performance made for autistic people that welcomes their presence and participation in the spaces and places of theatre and performance, responding to their unique needs. I have argued that key features of quirky dramaturgy include relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness and demonstrate their significance across the domains of space, audience, performer and community. This thesis has analysed the features of quirky dramaturgy through the spheres of space, audience, performer and community – showcasing how the theories and practices of quirky dramaturgy impact each of these spheres. Through this analysis, I have demonstrated how quirky dramaturgy is a theory and practice that artists and scholars can use to think about the ways in which access can make unique theatrical experiences, and the ways it can be utilised alongside access policies to make more effective and holistic legislation for autistic people.

Through my analysis of quirky dramaturgy and space, I have argued that space and the alterations of its logics for autistic people is imperative in creating performance events that are accessible and relaxed. Through performance analysis of *All in a Row* and *Phillip Pullman's Grimm Tales*, I have shown how contemporary relaxed performance practices have been used within UK theatres – highlighting alongside data from the State of Theatre Access Reports, that current arts access policies for autistic people do not go far enough. I have used quirky dramaturgy to realign these access policy issues – arguing that more flexible approaches to relaxedness allows for autistic people to neuroqueer neuronormative logics of space. This can be achieved through changes within the performance event such as chill out zones, more relaxed technical elements, removal of stimuli that might cause sensory overload or visual stories to help autistic audiences prepare for their visit to the theatre. Although problematic framings of relaxed performances around children's theatre by

theatre institutions and policy makers infantilise autistic people and their needs, quirky dramaturgy can neuroqueer this ableist rhetoric by making relaxed and flexible autistic performances with spaces created with autistic audiences in mind.

My analysis of quirky dramaturgy and audiences examined the ways in which artists make performance work with autistic audiences in mind – showcasing how quirky dramaturgy allows for free expression and freedom in contrast to mainstream UK theatre etiquette cultures in the UK. By looking at the ways in which quirky dramaturgy engages with audiences in Vijay Patel's *Sometimes I Leave* and Oily Cart's *All Wrapped Up*, I have shown how neuroqueering curative and ill-conceived theoretical approaches to autistic cognition, such as theory of mind, creates a more relaxed and flexible theatregoing experience. This is achieved through the emphasis on the cognitive and kinaesthetic qualities of autism – using participatory and immersive performance practices to create performance events that allow the audience member to engage with the performance flexibly. In structuring the performance event in a manner that is focused on autistic affect and the neuroqueering of theory of mind approaches to theorising autistic cognition, quirky dramaturgy asks us to examine and reconsider neuronormative rhetoric towards spectatorship and cognition.

These curative neuronormative rhetorical approaches to autistic audiences are also present for autistic artists. Relating quirky dramaturgy to performers through the analysis of Cian Binchy's performance in *MADHOUSE re:exit* and Xandri Selwyn's *#Binariesbegon,* I showcase` how the features of quirky dramaturgy can be used by artists to create [dis]comfort. The features of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness come together for the autistic artist in creating [dis]comfort, making performance worlds that cater to making autistic people feel comfortable and discomforting neurotypical people. The aim of this is to help educate neurotypicals on the daily struggles that autistic people face, while also ensuring the performance is safe and welcoming to the needs of autistic theatregoers. For Binchy and Selwyn, they do this by having their characters inhabit dystopic futures – embodying and critiquing ableist and heteronormative understanding of autism,

and challenging issues of infantilisation and gender. The combination of the presence of the autistic artist, the [dis]comfort quirky dramaturgy and its features create, and these futuristic settings, brings to light issues of employment for autistic people. The presence of the autistic artist within quirky dramaturgy challenges access and legislation designed to support disabled people. Through a more relaxed and flexible strategy for employment access, we can create support and opportunities for autistic artists. Looking at the relaxed practice that quirky dramaturgical practitioners uses, we can use visual stories, remove excessive jargon, remove sensory triggers from workplace spaces and rethink neuronormative rhetoric on behaviour. In a post-Brexit UK recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, this support is more important now than ever when cuts and support for disabled people is threatened, more so when faced with successive Conservative governments that have treated disabled people with contempt. Quirky dramaturgical theories and practices relating to the performer, seek to make the artist visible and ensure that the support they can receive is as flexible and as responsive to their needs as an autistic person and as an artist as possible.

Finally, my analysis of quirky dramaturgy and communities examined how quirky dramaturgical theories and practice can become hubs for autistic people to gather, socialise and self-advocate. The Autism Arts Festival and curated artistic online spaces provide two settings that exist within different social contexts. Annette Foster's *Adventures of the Super Autie Gang* at The Autism Arts Festival occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, and Flute Theatre's *Pericles Online* occurred during the UK lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both performances frame the autistic community as collaborators in the dramaturgical process – giving theatregoers flexibility in the ways in which they approach access. This is achieved by The Autism Arts Festival through the use of questionnaires and feedback forms to gain responses from festival goers on ways to improve access. Flute Theatre likewise achieves this by using online streams and video call software to allow audiences to engage with the performance in the way they see fit, with volume and video settings allowing the performance to be flexibly adapted to be relaxed for autistic people. In giving flexible and relaxed approaches to access and the way that communities come together around such issues,

quirky dramaturgy articulates the importance of giving people a voice. In placing the importance of community voices and responses to create feedback and reform, quirky dramaturgy can begin to look beyond the realms of theatre and performance, and begin to think about the ways in which neuroqueering neuronormative legislation can create a better future for autistic people.

As this thesis has shown, the climate for autistic spectatorship is certainly improving, although the strategies and approaches used by policy makers and scholars need to better position autistic subjectivity as the basis for effective, long-term change and support. In this vein it has been imperative throughout this thesis that I let my own autistic subjectivity be known in order to relate my personal connection with the matters discussed. Quirky dramaturgy provides an opportunity for us to rethink how to provide the forms of access and policies of who has the right to access many areas of our society here within the UK. In looking at space, audiences, performers, and communities, I have shown not just the implications that quirky dramaturgy can have within the arts, but the broader, more far-reaching opportunities it provides for thinking about access and support for autistic people within the UK. The change to how we think about policy and engagement with the communities these policies impact can only provide a more focused responsive set of strategies and legislation that can help provide the resources they need. This emphasises the broader reaching scope of this project and its continual development and research as quirky dramaturgy.

6.1: Creating distinct theatrical experiences

This thesis has situated the importance of distinct and unique experiences for people that have autism – seeking to make performance events made for autistic people as opposed to adapting neurotypical shows for autistic theatregoers. Although non-quirky dramaturgical theories and practices are indeed valid and worthwhile, it can be also restrictive, because as autistics we never truly get the chance to formulate our own autistic theatregoing languages, instead becoming intertwined and dependent on the success of mainstream neuronormative pieces of performance.

Chapter 2 emphasised this point via relaxed performance programming issues – including access being provided to predominantly children's theatre. Chapter 3 showcased how spectatorship behavioural conventions creates access issues and push autistic people outside of mainstream theatre spaces, while Chapter 4 highlighted the representational issues arts employment and autistic artists are faced with, and Chapter 5 showed the advocacy benefits in fostering community in spaces outside of these neuronormative environments. This all comes together to paint a picture of the ways in which theatre experiences can be constructed via quirky dramaturgy that provides autistic people with the holistic, elastic forms of access that best cater to their needs while creating unique artistic experiences. Theatre companies such as Oily Cart and Flute Theatre have been making unique and interesting pieces of work for years specifically for autistic and learning-disabled children, while autistic artists such as Vijay Patel, Cian Binchy and Xandri Selwyn create work that places to the forefront their own subjective lived experiences as autistic people. There is a breadth of amazing work being done by theatre makers and artists to demystify autism and create unique experiences beyond what is being offered within mainstream theatre institutions.

These quirky dramaturgical practices should be seen as a model which more arts intuitions within the UK should follow in order to provide a better quality of access, all the while allowing for performance events that seek to be more reflective of the various ways in which we might enjoy, perceive and respond to live performance. Oily Cart for instance, focuses on pieces of performance that focus on the kinaesthetic and sensory characteristics of the autistic spectator – creating playful and engaging worlds for people to explore, such as *All Wrapped Up*. Work such as this, and festivals that focus on advocacy of autistic people such as The Autism Arts Festival, paint a picture of an arts landscape shifting towards thinking about different aesthetic and structural ways of experiencing theatre. Nicola Shaughnessy writes that:

> There is, moreover, evidence of a different kind of engagement and a new aesthetics emerging in contemporary performance practice as the influence of applied theatre and socially engaged art

> contribute to an ethical turn through work which is process orientated, produced in social contexts, and which foregrounds the role of the audience as partakers whose experiences and responses are valued[344]

This process is socially engaged theory and practice that focuses on neurodivergence, which is seen in the application of quirky dramaturgy throughout this thesis. This means that quirky dramaturgy uses access as a theoretical and practical methodology with the aims of relaxedness, flexibility and neuroqueerness, as opposed to being framed solely as some form of outreach. In placing the audience at the forefront and structuring a dramaturgical practice interested in their subjective experiences as autistics, we can make a more holistic form of access that does not compromise on artistic or creative licence, but rather opens up a variety of new and exciting performance making opportunities and strategies. Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner echo this sentiment, arguing that:

> At its simplest, the live encounter of contemporary theatre may be represented by the relationship between story-teller and the listener, a relationship that presupposes some level of interaction and critique, as well as a shared imaginative engagement [345]

Behrndt and Turner argue that live performance is defined by the relationship between the artist and the audience – creating a shared imagination of the worlds that evokes the importance of a dramaturgy framework interested in responsive dialogue with those it is providing access and performance for. The disconnect between large theatre institutions and the work that independent artists and specialist theatre companies do lies in the direct engagement that is done with autistic people. As an autistic it feels important to express and be open about my own subjectivity for this reason, as often times autistics find their issues or dialogues co-opted by large institutions that claim to speak on our behalf. Putting on performances that deal with the subject of autism, then failing in

[344] Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.255.
[345] Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Revised Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p.207.

the bare minimum in providing adequate volume of relaxed performances for autistic people to see the show, is damning on the level of effort or interest these large theatres have in engaging with autistic audiences and creating meaningful experiences for them.

To move forward and create experiences that are distinct and impactful, there is much that can be done with UK theatre to create a more responsive and holistic approach. In looking towards quirky dramaturgy, we have the frameworks laid out that artists, theatres and policy makers can examine to create meaningful experiences for autistic people within mainstream theatre spaces. Of course, theatres, as I laid out in great detail in Chapter 2, can expand relaxed performances beyond their current typecast programming and provide a greater volume of relaxed performances for autistic audiences. Theatres should also aim to reframe their access policies away from how performances be made accessible and avoid triggers, and instead think about how changing performances can enhance the experiences of autistic audiences. Access is not solely some negative cutting away of aspects of work to help accommodate autistic audiences, but rather a way of allowing audiences the best chance to experience and enjoy theatre. In doing so we are creating much more distinct experiences for autistic audiences that are not just hack and slashed versions of neurotypical shows. Quirky dramaturgy emphasises this understanding that access is a conscious creative and artistic endeavour done to create the best possible experiences for autistic theatregoers. *The* Autism Arts Festival crystalized this idea in its diverse programming and approach to access that made audiences feel cared for, safe, and which allowed for them to enjoy the breadth of work being shown. Participation and audience engagement within the performance world, creating interactive spaces free for audiences to explore and interact with allows for autistic audiences to enjoy the sensory aspects of the performance and feel more engaged and stimulated as opposed to being seated for the duration of a performance. Theatres can consider the inclusion of stim breaks for long performances to break up the time an autistic theatregoer might have to remain seated. Alongside making ear protectors available, theatres might also consider sensory toys that they can play with and be stimulated by as they watch a performance. These are all focused

examples that aim to show that making meaningful performances for autistic people need not be some arduous economic burden for theatres, but rather an interesting opportunity for artistic expression. These experiences can be further magnified and brought to a wider audience with greater effectiveness if theatres employ or hire autistic artists, activists and scholars alongside questionnaires and feedback forms to best fine tune and frame those experiences in accordance to the needs of their community. Autistic artists getting more opportunities to create work within larger more mainstream spaces also helps in magnifying the voices of autistic artists within the UK.

6.2: Self-advocacy and policy reform

Quirky dramaturgy can promote and create self-advocacy through the positioning of us autistics as the central point of the performance event, wherein experiences, perceptions and visibility are recognised. Quirky dramaturgy offers a chance for policy makers to rethink the ways in which access is formed and to manifest a more holistic form of access and legislation that can extend beyond the arts sector, into other facets of life within the UK. Quirky dramaturgy can be used as a means of examining and working alongside strategies and policies already in place to examine how best reforms can be made to create the best possible policies that can benefit the most autistic people. As autistic people employing quirky dramaturgy within the arts sector can empower and give voices to those who feel marginalised or excluded, helping to fuel the ever-growing autistic advocacy movement within the UK and putting pressures on institutions and policy makers to make meaningful and impactful reform to arts access in the UK. Having a diverse range of ways to support autistic people benefits the arts sector as a whole. Jen Harvie proposes that:

> The shift to diversified networks of arts support is not intrinsically bad or neoliberal. It can facilitate art's survival, enhance their resilience and help them grow systems of support in the face of declining structures of support, avoid the vagaries of the market, resist instrumentalist

deployment by a single powerful source, lead rather than be led by their funders and be realistic about what is achievable."[346]

Harvie argues for a diverse support network within the arts that provides funding support to a range of artists, with the aim of creating a more resilient sector and market that is not overly centralised economically. The aim is to create an industry more proactive and less beholden to investors or those who hold the power of who chooses whom gets funding. COVID-19 has exposed this over centralised arts sector that isolated and endangered the livelihoods of freelance artists and the survival of small local theatres and performance venues. Flexible access policy that is decentralised from one central body or institution will ensure a more diverse and elastic form of policy making that can deal more readily with the needs of the audience. Quirky dramaturgical methods already do this by framing the structuring of the performance event around subjective experience and the autistic individual, with the purpose of taking the power away from institutions who fail to effectively produce adequate access, and into the hands of audiences and artists who can best inform the breadth and diversity of changes needed. Harvie continues:

Some of the measures that might help realize this future would be mandating the best endowed companies (such as the NT, the RSC, the Southbank Centre and the ROH) to spread their resources more fully across the arts sector; supporting smaller organizations to collaborate and share resources (for example, management infrastructure such as expertise in human resources, information technology and marketing); and exploring ways of making emerging forms of devolved audience collaboration[…]socially engaged. [347]

Harvie argues for the redistributing of resources so that smaller theatres and organisations might better make use of resources afforded to the largest arts venues in the country – creating a more far-reaching volume in resources. This is emulated by the lack of effective autism access afforded by

[346] Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) pp.190-191
[347] Ibid.,p.191

these large theatres despite the disproportionate funding they receive. Directing some of these resources to other theatres, or by having these large theatres enter in creative and consultancy-based collaboration can create a more interwoven network of theatres and artists that can share creative and policy strategies. A continual, ongoing dialogue between artist and audience, the quirky dramaturgical idea that access is a continual negotiation by artist and theatregoer in the creation of autistic artwork and performance, articulates this point. The facilitation of autistic artists and theatregoing experiences and the direct feedback which theatres, audiences and artists can enter a more holistic nuanced era of theatre access that evolves and responds with their audiences that are engaging with it. In this way we create a framework that allows for autistics to be self-advocates and to speak directly and impact the sort of performance events theatres can offer and provide, while theatres get a robust interconnected network of theatres and audience members feeding back and ensuring effective policy reform within the arts sector. Steven K. Kapp writes in regards to the advocacy birthed from the neurodiversity movement that

> The movement has made great progress and has begun to enter politics, yet unless the movement further coalesces in a broader coalition in more regions of the globe, its impact on combating the growing austerity in a global competitive economy may be limited"[348]

Kapp questions the potential political impact of neurodiversity as a movement within political spheres and its impact within a globalised world economy. The argument proposed is that as advocacy becomes more global and allyships and coalitions continue to be forged and grow, it might find itself restricted by austerity policies within the global economy and market. This is certainly true in regards to the austerity policies of successive Conservative governments within the UK negatively impacting quality of life, employment support and welfare, and the global COVID-19 pandemic has only caused these issues to become magnified. But as the work of online communities and spaces

[348] Steven K. Kapp, 'Conclusion', *Autistic Community and The Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline*, Ed. Steven K. Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp.305-318 (p.314).

and the work that theatre groups such as Flute Theatre have done in cultivating and producing online performances, alongside online theatre streaming services by UK theatres such as the National Theatre at Home, the pandemic has created new ways of thinking about engagement, care and support when we cannot physically engage with one another. Theatre has become the lifeblood for so many people and become an invaluable part of the lives of many autistic people. Theatre can provide an interlinking part of the ways in which we as autistics advocate for ourselves and celebrate who we are. In focusing in on access and support within one facet and sector of UK society, quirky dramaturgy can move outwards and begin to see how access and support can be implemented to assist autistic people in their everyday lives.

6.3: Does UK Access Policy do enough for autistic people?

UK Arts Access policy at present can best be described as underwhelming. Although growth is occurring, the rate is such that any functional nationwide access changes are small. The growth is unacceptable in terms of the realistic rate of growth we should be expecting. Theatres and arts organisations seem to struggle with disabled employment at a rate below the national average – a national average that is already a meagre number, while access into theatre spaces for audiences is a bare minimum. I have laid out the failures on the part of the arts sector to provide effective holistic care to autistic theatregoers, but that does not mean that there is not a zero amount of access being done within the arts sector. Disabled artists are being supported by specialist theatre companies that can assist autistic people or those who might have other needs in the creation of work as well as the administrative tasks of funding applications. Theatres in the UK have been increasing the number of relaxed performances being programmed. Theatre companies are making more targeted, focused work aimed at autistic children and their families to get them actively engaged with the arts at an early age. Despite these positives, however, it is apparent that access for autistic people is still rife with neuronormative biases that impact the ineffective access-making strategies and inability to shift towards policy that is more elastic in its care and support for autistic theatregoers.

Marla Carlson writes of the need to move away from the neurotypical neurodivergent dichotomy that assigns difference as a result of some fictitious notion of 'normal'. This shift is important from an access and support perspective, as this will lead to greater understanding towards autistic people by abandoning the concept of a 'normal' brain. As Carlson explains: 'Abandoning the categorical divide makes it possible to move past anthropocentric privileging of the human over the inhuman, normate over anomalous bodies, neurotypical over neurodiverse ways of communicating and being in the world.'[349]. It has been this approach that has informed the ways in which neuronormative rhetoric frames and shapes ineffective access and support because it is rooted in this idea of functionality. And while there is no magic bullet to eradicate systemic deeply interwoven neuronormative biases that permeate within British culture, we can be more conscious of the existence of such biases, and slowly rethink our relationship to neurology and identity. Doing so will allow for policy to be written and legislated in such a way that it no longer seems to be radiating with the biases towards neuronormative rhetoric that as autistic people we have had to navigate and deal with for our entire lives.

Presently, arts access policy feels more like a set of arbitrary hoops which institutions and organisations have jumped through in order to ensure continued funding and shield them from potential legal ramifications. Access feels tokenistic, and, as is the case with *All in a Row,* at times outright offensive and insulting in the level of effort and care taken regarding the content and form of the performance event. Small fringe festivals like The Autism Arts Festival can create more engaging, holistic and carefully curated access for autistic spectators than the largest theatre organisations within the UK. 'The State of Theatre Access' reports referred to throughout this thesis have shown the largest and most heavily funded theatres in this country as incapable of providing the level of care and support for disabled theatre goers which one might expect. The arts sector has a strange and unhealthy habit of talking about safe and inclusive spaces for people to come and see

[349] Marla Carlson, *Affect, Animals and Autists*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018) p.189

art within and hear a breadth of different stories and voices, but the reality is that the arts sector exists within the same neuronormative bubble the rest of the UK exists within. As a result, the discussion of how the arts sector can do better ultimately becomes one about how can the UK as a whole do better improving access and support for autistic people. As Kabie Brook puts it:

> The autistic rights movement is really in its infancy. Autistic people's organisations are few and we do not hold senior or influential posts in the organisations that claim to represent and support us. By that I mean the large corporate charities that are still 'for' rather than 'by' us,[350]

Brook underscores the current representational issues for autistic people in positions within autistic charities and organisations. These charities and organisations that claim to speak for autistic people are instead pillars of the neuronormative rhetoric that cannibalise autistic issues and enable and mainstream curative languages. Corporate ideas of autism seem to frame It as more economically viable to restrict or deny access and support than provide the care autistic people might need. This has been the trend of austerity politics under UK Conservative governments that has by extension, affected the arts sector in its effectiveness to help autistic people, alongside many other disabled people across the UK. This is the first and most noticeable roadblock in the ways in which access policy is currently constructed within the UK.

Quirky dramaturgy shows us a framework to work alongside pre-existing legislative frameworks already in place to create the sorts of effective access policy that many have long sought in this country. Theatre holds a unique and interesting placement within this debate that makes it perfectly suited for opening up spaces and services to autistic people and demystifying autism. The most important aspects of any strong policy implementation are understanding the feelings of the communities it is affecting. Ergo, a dramaturg should seek to examine and gain feedback from audiences on how to best accommodate and provide a degree of elasticity in the experiences people

[350] Kabie Brook, Quoted in Janine Booth, *Autism in the Workplace: Removing Barriers and Challenging Discrimination (*London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016) p.117

wish to have within the theatre. Policy makers should also approach legislation with a holistic sense of understanding. Beyond this point, which has been stressed repeatedly throughout this thesis, is understanding the ways in which access isn't simply access, but its own distinct aesthetic and creative choice that brings about a whole new set of ways to spectate and create theatre. Although relaxed performances attempt this, it is the work of autistic artists like Vijay Patel, Cian Binchy and Xandri Selwyn that create dramaturgically quirky pieces of performance that affirm this point about access. Oily Cart and Flute Theatre present this also through examining the ways in which access can serve not just a creative purpose, but a developmental one too, while communal physical spaces like The Autism Arts Festival drew on distinctly autistic social engagements and ensured comfort and safety within those social contexts for autistic theatregoers. In these cases, access is not simply altering a space or allowing for right to enter to make use of its resources. Rather, they have other, focused and thought out aims beyond just access. Access policy in the UK is underwhelming and lacklustre because it fundamentally misunderstands the use of access. Access should not be the end result, but rather a vehicle to a function. Let me use for an example the use of public transport as an autistic person using the logics of quirky dramaturgy. A number of train lines now have quiet carriages where travellers might relax, read or otherwise unplug without the chaotic noise of constant chattering that might come with a busy train carriage. There are often times as an autistic person that this is incredibly useful, as loud and multiple sets of conversations within a train carriage can get quite stressful and overstimulating. Much like a relaxed performance, the space has been altered in such a way to be less overstimulating, thereby allowing people the chance to relax. But the access is the function, and does not involve thinking further about how space can be used not only in helping people relax in a quieter setting while commuting, but how this access can facilitate other aims. This train carriage can create a developmental opportunity to help assist people in the travels of social contact and public transport. The textures, the engagement with other commuters – these are potential points of contact that autistics will have with stimuli within the world that can potentially be a positive or negative experience depending on the understanding of their needs.

Access is more complex and multi-layered than simply doing x, y or z and expecting a blanket result to the benefit of all.

It is exactly this sentiment that this thesis has shown. UK theatre needs to reassess and approach access with a more holistic and elastic strategy in mind that benefits those whom they seek to provide access and support for. It is for this reason that quirky dramaturgy is an invaluable means through which we might create a much more elastic access framework for autistic people that enables the function of access while simultaneously promoting unique and interesting theatrical experiences for autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy is a means through which access comes to be understood as more than a tokenistic gesture but as part of an aesthetic framework with aspirations for wider reform outside of the arts sector for autistic people. Quirky dramaturgy as this thesis has shown, has constructed a creative structure that thinks about the mechanisms of access and support for autistic people within the UK not just as outreach, but as its own distinct artistic form that aims instead to create new experiences as opposed to adapting or altering pre-existing experiences. It is about giving autistic people a voice and freedom to express themselves without neuronormative rhetoric framing how and what they should experience and how others should perceive the disabled and neurodivergent. Quirky dramaturgy and the issues of access within theatre for autistic people are a microcosm of the larger issues which autistic people within the UK are faced with. For instance, Mitzi Waltz writes that:

> The emergence of people with autism as participants in the creation, furtherance, or amelioration of discourses and practices around autism does not represent an end stage. Bodies, identities, rights, and the way these are perceived and controlled will continue to be contested, as they are in other areas of impairment and difference.[351]

Attempts of access, or forward steps in the support of autistic people, does not symbolise the abolition of ableist and neuronormative ways of seeing people like us, although strides have been

[351] Mitzi Waltz, *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.164

made in attempts to accommodate us within the arts. However, the approach and means of framing access must alter if we can strive towards effective, long-lasting reform that can positively impact the lives of autistic people across the UK. The theatre is one of many contests which autistic people face with regards to their right to access and for the sector to fulfil its duty to create said access. And what is done within the arts in accommodating and assisting autistic people as theatregoers, as artists, as human beings, serves the benefit of the autistic community and the arts sector.

Tom Shakespeare writes that 'A social approach to disability is indispensable. The medicalization of disability is inappropriate and an obstacle to effective analysis and policy.'[352] Indeed this entire thesis has emphasised this point: that a holistic form of access and support for autistic people within UK theatres will promote greater engagement and different and unique theatrical experiences. Quirky dramaturgy is a roadmap that artists might look towards when thinking about engaging with autistic audiences or how their work can best be made with autistic theatregoers in mind. A neuronormative and lazy approach to making access that should be elastic and made to suit the needs of those it seeks to help has persisted in UK theatre for too long. Sadly this is but a symptom of the broader climate surrounding disability within the UK that Conservative governments have fostered and promoted. There is much that can still be done to improve arts access for autistic people within the UK, but quirky dramaturgy can help renegotiate how we see our own relationship with access in order to create a theory and practice that is a more artistic and expressive means of staging and experiencing being autistic. This brings me back to the beginning of the thesis, with the story of Gregor Moss being humiliated at a West End performance and leaving with their father. Access is being attempted at present within UK theatres and the arts sector as a whole, but the care and love within these large theatre institutions and organisations is just not there. Despite these failings, this thesis has shown that many theatre companies and artists outside of these large UK theatres make carefully crafted work that is relaxed, flexible and neuroqueer – that

[352] Tom Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', *The Disability Studies Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Lenard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010) p.203

is made with autistic people in mind. To return to the start of the thesis, what would have happened to Gregor and his father if quirky dramaturgical practices were implemented and their presence was not seen as intrusive and unwelcomed? I cannot fathom the confusion and humiliation Gregor must have endured, and how that might have shaped negative feelings towards theatre. What if instead they were to see a work by Binchy, Patel, Selwyn, Foster, Oily Cart or Flute Theatre? What if they had known about special festivals such as The Autism Arts Festival? As an autistic person, theatre has been an invaluable resource in understanding myself, and saving my life from extreme depressive episodes. There are a plethora of artists wanting to bring theatre to autistic people, to help them find a voice and understand themselves and the world. The arts sector needs to be held accountable for its own failings and to understand that they can do better and be a more accessible and open place for all. It has saved my life and driven me. It has, birthed this project into being. With quirky dramaturgy we have a theory and practice which we can use to make a positive change in the lives of so many autistic people, and make them not feel ashamed for how their brains work.

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