

Journal of the International Association of Theatre for Autism



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Cover Photo: Two actors from the Acting Antics program.

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

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A Note from the Editor

Valerie Paradiz, Ph.D.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Comedy and Autism: A Parallel Universe

Brian Gordon

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Welcome to my world.

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

Total Serendipity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Experience at Work

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why the hell are we stopping?

Brian: Good question. Guess What? (This is a great calming and redirection tool).

Scott: What?

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

Scott: Yes.

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

Scott: What?

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

Scott: What?

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

Scott: Yes (somewhat less agitated now).

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

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

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

Scott: I'll wait in the car.

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

Scott: What?

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

Scott: Yeah.

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

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

Brian: You raised your voice. Were you angry?

Scott: Yes.

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

Scott: Yes.

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

Scott: No...not really.

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

Scott: No.

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

Scott: No.

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

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

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

Scott: I would ask you first.

Brian: Would you raise your voice?

Scott: No.

Brian: Why?

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

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

Scott: Yes

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

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

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

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

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

Scott: What...why!

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

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

Brian: Oh my G_D!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brian: I am going inside to get a drink:
 Scott: Why?!
 Brian: (calmly) Because I am thirsty, need water, and if I don't then I could faint and crash the car and we wouldn't get to your job at the shelter...so...can I get the drink?
 Scott: Okay (look of annoyed tolerance)

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

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

Brian: Five minutes.

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

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

Scott: What?

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

Scott: Yeah [excited]...

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

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

Brian: Totally agree but guess what?

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

Scott: [pausing and thinking intensely] Hey, that's not that long.

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

Scott: No thanks.

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

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

Another Missing Piece

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

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

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

At the Present

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

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

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

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

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

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

Please know that I take what I do very seriously.

Brian Gordon can be reached at bgordon94@yahoo.com