

## Autism & Theatre

Unicorn Theatre, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011  
Welcome speech by David Wood OBE



Action for Children's Arts is delighted to be co-hosting this very important event. ACA is a membership charity that champions all children's arts – the national voice of children's arts. We campaign - for a higher profile and status. We connect practitioners. We celebrate the exciting work in the UK for children, and in which children participate up to the age of 12.

We in ACA often quote Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – 'Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'. We quote it in the hope it may happen – in the UK it certainly hasn't happened yet.

'Every' is the first word – 'Every child ... has the right.' And today's conference throws out the question how inclusive is our theatre and how inclusive should it be, with particular reference to autism.

I don't profess to be anywhere near an expert in autism – far from it. So I welcome the chance today to hear from many who are. To learn and to work towards solutions.

In children's theatre, I think we have a reasonable record of inclusiveness. Signed performances are regularly given. Physically disabled children are made welcome. Wheelchair access is better than it was. And some companies, like the wonderful Oily Cart, specialise in performances for children with all kinds of disability. Polka Theatre now advertises special 'AUTISM FRIENDLY' performances. As do Unicorn, and West Yorkshire Playhouse.

But what about adult theatre? Ballet? Opera? That's what I'm eager to learn about today. How can our theatres best accommodate and welcome those with autism? Those who want to see Shakespeare, a musical or Coppelia or The Magic Flute?

Noise is one important area ...

In Elizabethan theatre, we are told the audiences made noise, heckled, participated. A bit like panto today.

But in general we prefer our audiences to keep quiet. We assume an unwritten contract with the audience, by which we perform and they remain passive.

Consequently performers feel justifiably aggrieved if audiences talk, noisily rustle their sweet wrappers or cough loudly in the quiet bits – and often audience members may feel aggrieved too.

Many of us, I think, sympathised with Richard Griffiths when he stopped the play to castigate the owner of a mobile phone that rang .....

But surely we would not have sympathised if he had reacted this way to the involuntary noises made by an autistic person enjoying themselves.

What should be our – theatre workers' – reaction to that noise? To ignore it? Or to find compromises – positive compromises? Soundproof boxes? Like those for crying babies provided by the Children's Theatre, Minneapolis, and the egg in Bath. Or might they seem patronising? Regular AUTISM FRIENDLY performances? My daughter, Katherine, works for the Society of London Theatre – she pointed me to a website with news of the first AUTISM THEATRE INITIATIVE on Broadway which, only days ago staged a specially adapted performance of THE LION KING, with great success.

Do we need a West End initiative like this? There was a trial one in cinemas recently. Do or should the National and the RSC have a policy? And the Royal Opera House? The Coliseum?

How can we make our theatre as inclusive as we would all like it to be?

Let's hope we find some answers today!

David Wood  
Chair ACA

