



Spectrum Podcasts

Dr. Jane Bluestein
Instructional Support Services, Inc.

Theater and Autism Spectrum: A Voice for Everyone

Guest: Brian Haney

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Background and Bio: Brian Haney has been acting, directing, writing, and teaching in Albuquerque, New Mexico for 16 years. As Theatre-in-the-Making's Creative Director, he has taught numerous workshops focused on ensemble acting, clowning, applied drama, and Shakespeare. From 2007-2011, he was an artist-in-residence at Amy Biehl High School working with teachers and students to help bring the texts of Macbeth and Othello to life. For the last 4 years, Brian has continued to develop the Spectrum Project, an innovative program in which people with autism spectrum disorder create an original work of dramatic art. Brian has taught with both the Albuquerque Little Theatre and Albuquerque Academy.

Program Description: In a recent theater performance of autistic and neurotypical adults, Dr. Bluestein saw the results of Brian Haney's work with the group through the processes of creating, rehearsing, and performing a script. In this podcast, Haney talks about the cast, the project, and the model he developed. He also discusses the social and therapeutic value of his ensemble-based program, reactions of the participants' parents and families, the importance of the arts to education (and in particular, the value to individuals with special needs), and the different ways in which the process is able to give even non-verbal participants a voice.

Highlights of Podcast:

Brian Haney starts by describing his work with the Spectrum Project, working with individuals across the neurological spectrum, specifically with adults with autism spectrum disorder and neurotypical adults. Brian uses theater as a way to "for people with all different kinds of brains to come together and collaborate."

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Neurotypical: "a term meant to capture the wide range of cognitive types that are outside of the autism spectrum or what would more insultingly be called 'normal.'"

Brian has solicited assistance with the Spectrum Project with members of the community, University (of New Mexico) students, and therapists who help the ensemble members collaborate to create a theater piece which they then perform together.

Cast members were over the age of 18. Most members involved with the project have been in their 20s. They have had people working with them into their 40s. They have no age requirements and are open to working with people of all ages.

The cast (eight individuals) had a wide range of abilities, skills, and challenges. They also had four or five support people who worked with them along the way.

History:

Brian has been a theater educator for a number of years and has worked with people as young as five. Years ago, Theater-in-the-Making decided to branch out from its tuition-based programs to other groups in the community. Working with several therapists from the University of New Mexico's Center for Development and Disability, the group decided to run a program with people with autism.

Initially considered working with youth with Autism but realized that the real gap in programs being offered was with adults. "As far as what's out there and what's being offered, you would think that people stopped having autism after about the age of sixteen or seventeen." Few programs available in the Arts for this population.

UNM CDD secured some funds to research this issue and conducted a few pilot programs, in part to see if Haney was the right person to work with this population. At first, talked about only working with high-functioning individuals, but decided it would be better "to have a representative population of the wide spectrum of how autism expresses itself."

One of the strengths of the classes that Theater-in-The-Making offers is that it is truly ensemble-based, allowing individuals opportunities to perform at a level at which they can be successful: "A group of people working together to be somewhat more than the sum of their parts..."

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Has had to learn to see what skills and strengths each individual brings to the table. Looks at the performances that are held at the conclusion of the classes he teaches as a celebration of the group that has been assembled via the process of creating and rehearsing a theater piece. "The fact that we are doing theater is in some ways beside the point."

"I truly believe that a group of people engaged in working together toward a common goal, having to put aside difference so that we can achieve a common goal, by the very nature of working together are going to become closer and closer as time goes by when they face they face the crisis of the deadline together. The unity of that struggle helps them set aside differences."

Noted that not only did the group perform the show, but the performance was one that the group had written together.

"Not only are we having individuals with Autism and individuals without Autism working together to perform, we're also asking them to create a show more or less from scratch."

Shows are theme based.

Process:

Pilots held several years ago were successful in introducing the people who were involved with these groups to the skills that were then required to step forward and create a show from scratch. They do that via personal writing that they do about the topic that we're talking about, through collaborations that happen in class, through improvisations that happen in class, and through throwing ideas back and forth to come up with an idea that might make a good scene.

Because the successes they witnessed seemed to come from a series of small steps, the Spectrum Project is being offered in two parts. They start (in November) with a month-long series of classes to introduce the project. Haney teaches acting skills, social skills, and even addressing "how to take a theater class" for people who are so far out of their comfort zone.

Part of the intent of this stage is to give Haney an opportunity to work with different individuals in a low-stakes way. Wants to be sure that individuals don't feel pressured to do more than they are capable of doing. "As far as I'm concerned, my job is to find a way for every single individual in my class to have a success. Maybe they can have

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more than one success, but if they can have at least one success, then I feel that I've accomplished my job."

By the end of this period, they offer an open house, inviting family and friends to come in and participate in the kinds of exercises they do in their workshops. In that open house, participants help instruct others on rules of particular games or exercises they're doing, so the open house is essentially run by the students themselves.

When that's finished, they take a break for the holidays and then start up again in January. By then, they know what their theme is going to be. At that point, they begin a month of "creation work," where they imagine ideas for scenes that might be used, solicit individual writing, and work in class to create material that can fill up their script and become the work that creates the show they present. The following month is devoted to rehearsing the show.

The group goes from "absolutely nothing to a 45-minute script in eight weeks."

Parents:

Parents of the participants were thrilled with the performance. Haney discusses parents' responses and reactions, noting that some parents of autistic children are extremely protective, trying to keep them from being hurt by the world. Some have gone out and fiercely advocated for their child to be able to do whatever the child wants (and is able) to do. "It's not an individual with autism; it's a whole family with autism."

Some parents come in confident that their child is absolutely prepared for the class. Others are less certain.

The range of students included one individual who recited a full page of fairly sophisticated script (which he had written himself) and others who were non-verbal. (First time Haney had worked with a non-verbal individual.) I observed that Haney was able to provide an environment that was safe enough for each individual to be engaged and perform successfully at the level at which he or she could do so.

This is a fairly non-traditional (back-door) approach to working with this particular population. Even if individuals aren't able to participate in the program, they are still a part of the program and often come back year after year, come to the performances, and stay in touch with Brian.

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Despite not having previous experience working with this population, once Haney ran the pilot program and started developing relationships with the individuals involved, he realized that he needed to continue to offer these classes “that these people that I had come to care about so much were not going to have the opportunity to express themselves, which they do so beautifully.”

One of the things Haney noticed as they were putting the performance together was that “while there certainly is a therapeutic element to what... I’m doing, what I’m doing isn’t, strictly speaking, therapy.”

Haney came in to this project from an Arts background. “One of the things that you have to do when you’re creating art is to take a step into the unknown, to not necessarily know what the results are going to be, to at times even downplay the importance of what the results are. It’s the doing that is the important thing. It’s not so much what is accomplished. So you go forward with the information that you have, and wherever you wind up is a bit of a surprise for everyone involved.”

“When you’re dealing with disabilities with a therapeutic approach firmly in mind, often times, the results are very calculated.” Working with therapists forced Haney to get a little more concrete about what he was attempting to do. But he also felt that it was beneficial for the therapists as well.

“That’s the beautiful thing about self-expression. We don’t really know what someone is going to say when we... give them the floor and say ‘What do you want to tell us?’”

Noted that the show really isn’t about autism, hoping that “the show speaks to everyone and not just to someone who has autism or to someone who knows someone who has autism... My sincere hope is that we all get together and we all think about the fact that we’re all human beings, and that we all have the same fears and concerns.”

The title of the show was *Closer than they Appear* and the theme was “objects.”

Noted that there is a wide range of how autism expresses itself and that there is a wide range of what someone with autism is capable of doing. Haney found that it was very beneficial to pick themes that are very concrete but can be used metaphorically to be any number of things.

Technology

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Technology was a topic that kept coming up, and was presented several times in the show. "Technology as a source of communication for people with autism is kind of an interesting topic... One of the things that's very helpful for people with autism is understanding what the rules are, understanding what the expectations are, what's socially permissible and what's not. Those are things that are not always very clear to someone with autism. So having them stated clearly to them is very helpful sometimes. But technology is something that is... so new that we haven't really yet created societal expectations about what's OK and what's not. It can be a very freeing environment for someone with autism, but it can also be fraught with peril... so it's no wonder that it was such a rich vein for us to explore."

Importance of the arts in education

"As far as education is concerned, the arts are vitally important because they allow us to use the information that we pull in from all the other very important subjects... in creative ways. Because we can think outside the box with them, because we can play with those ideas, they become more exciting. And when they become more exciting, people become more invested in them. You know, mathematics is a very, very creative subject, but when you're just learning it, it's adding two plus two, which is not so exciting. There's one answer. And seeing that there are a lot of different answers, seeing that you can express yourself via whatever medium you choose, self-expression can be found in the garden, it can be found on the stage, it can be found on the page."

"Specifically with people with disabilities, and specifically autism... being able to communicate with people, being able to let someone know what you're thinking about, and having a medium through which to do that, is something that all of us desire."

"...It's been a very humbling privilege for me to be working with this community and to be helping to the best of my abilities people to be able to find their voices, to be able to say something to the world. You can not imagine how gratifying it is for someone to write something down on a piece of paper, hand it to someone else, for them to say, 'Ah, this is great! We should do this in front of *another* group of people,' and then perform it in front of people and have those people *get* it... to come up and say that they were moved by that. There are no words to explain how powerful that is."

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Additional Resources:

Theatre-in-the-Making, programs and performances for all ages, celebrating the power of theatre, <http://titm.org>

"Autistic Kids Prove their Drama is Therapeutic," article by Jean Weiss for MSN Health and Fitness about an acting coach who "uses theater as a means to unlock kids from an isolated world," <http://healthyliving.msn.com/pregnancy-parenting/kids-health/autistic-kids-prove-their-drama-is-therapeutic-1>

Autism Theatre Network and **Applied Theatre Center**, workshops, seminars and other customized activities with those whose lives have been touched by or touch upon autism, <http://www.appliedtheatrecenter.org/autismnetwork.html>

Sense Theatre, a stage of hope for children with autism, <http://sensetheatre.blogspot.com>

"The Roles We Play: Creating Theater with Autism Spectrum Youth," Autism One, PDF of powerpoint including lesson plans, processes (play, improv, story writing and scripting), model, and resources, <http://www.autismone.org/content/roles-we-play-creating-theater-autism-spectrum-youth>

Shakespeare, Theater and Autism. Members of Bridgeway House perform "A Midsummer Night's Dream," short video at <http://www2.registerguard.com/mm/index.php/videos/comments/shakespeare-theater-and-autism/>

The Miracle Project, creating community for children with autism through music, movement, theater, and film, <http://www.themiracleproject.org>

Autism Theatre Initiative, presentations of autism-friendly performances to make theater accessible to children and adults on the autism spectrum as well as their families, http://www.tdf.org/TDF_ServicePage.aspx?id=128

Sensory Friendly Films. AMC Theatres (AMC) and the Autism Society have teamed up to bring families affected by autism and other disabilities a special opportunity to enjoy their favorite films in a safe and accepting environment on a monthly basis with the "Sensory Friendly Films" program, <http://www.autism-society.org/get-involved/events/sensory-friendly-films/>

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