

## Advocating for a Neurodiverse Audience

[CHRISTINE V. SKORUPA](#)

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

### ABSTRACT

*In 2021, I was an actor in a sensory immersive piece at LIU Post titled [Branching Out](#). It was devised with a neurodiverse audience in mind (“neurodiverse” being used as a term for those with neurological differences that are oftentimes put at a deficit because of society’s unfair emphasis on ability). However, this was the first time I ever encountered sensory-friendly theatre, and began questioning the lack of audience inclusivity on Broadway. Upon further research, I learned that in 2022, Broadway’s Theatre Development Fund (TDF, 2022) provided only 3 “autism-friendly” Broadway shows. In response to this, I interviewed 3 women who are spearheading accessibility initiatives on Broadway (Courtney J. Boddie, Jennifer DiBella, and Lisa Carling) to discover what can feasibly be done to diversify theatre spaces. I am proposing a Universal Design for Theatregoing: one that is representative, inclusive, accessible, and ever-changing with research and new technology. This design is inspired by the [Universal Design for Learning](#) (UDL) Framework (CAST, 2018) that is commonly used in*

*Educational Theatre to ensure that every individual learner receives a meaningful and enriching educational experience. Akin to UDL, the Universal Design for Theatregoing adjusts the audience environment so that audiences may enjoy their theatre experience regardless of ability and without judgement.*

*“Systems do not maintain themselves; even our lack of intervention is an act of maintenance. Every structure in every society is upheld by the active and passive assistance of other human beings.”*

— Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*

## INTRODUCTION

On August 4, 2021, I received a casting notice from the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts at Long Island University for a project entitled *Branching Out*. The production description read as follows:

Casting actors for the Tilles Center original TYA production *Branching Out*. *Branching Out* is an original work of sensory immersion theatre created for audiences on the autism spectrum and those who have limited movement, sensory, and/or complex communication needs. Actors should have a basic understanding of the characteristics of autism and a desire to help children learn and thrive through the arts. This sensory immersion production is a hands-on interactive experience which will take place for small audiences in January, 2022. (Tilles Center, 2023)

The casting call was looking for a young actor to play the role of Natura, Mother Nature’s daughter. At the time, I had never heard of “sensory immersion theatre” before, nor did I have extensive experience working with audiences on the autism spectrum. I did, however, have experience learning about students with autism in an undergraduate Mental Health in Education course, so I was intrigued

as to how this kind of theatre experience would work. The director, Stephanie Turner, was looking specifically for a teaching artist who was comfortable with playing music, improvising with an audience, and most importantly had “extra compassion.” I figured if I could do any of those three things, it would be to exude extra compassion. I auditioned, interviewed with the creative team, and found out a week later I had gotten the part.

Our cast was composed of all women. One woman on the team was a teaching artist who primarily worked with neurodiverse populations, one woman on the team had autism spectrum disorder, one woman on the team was well-researched on theatre for young audiences with neurodiversities, and the rest of us were there with our open minds, ready to learn. We began with a quote from a book called *The Reason I Jump* by Naoki Higashida (2016), an autobiographical book written by a 13-year-old boy with nonverbal autism. The director told us that this quote inspired her vision for the piece, which would be a nature-based journey through the seasons.

Nature calms me down when I'm furious, and laughs with me when I'm happy. You might think that it's not possible that nature could be a friend, not really. But human beings are part of the animal kingdom too, and perhaps us people with autism still have some left-over awareness of this, buried somewhere deep down. I'll always cherish that part of me that thinks of nature as a friend. (Higashida, 2016)

We discussed the ways in which listening to and participating in a theatrical piece such as ours could look any number of ways. Therefore, we would work as an ensemble to create as many ways as possible to engage our audience. In hindsight, I now see that we were using the framework of [Universal Design for Learning](#) (UDL) to make our content as accessible as possible for all learners (CAST, 2018). With UDL, the environment that learners are in changes to suit their needs, rather than each individual learner having to stretch to fit the environment around them. UDL places an emphasis on engagement, representation, and action & expression, and the [UDL Framework](#) outlines how educational spaces can allow for equitable access to content.

1. Affective Networks: The “WHY” of learning—provides multiple means of engagement—interest, effort and persistence, and self-regulation.
2. Recognition Networks: The “WHAT” of learning—provides multiple means of representation—perception, language and symbols, and comprehension.
3. Strategic Networks: The “HOW” of learning—provides multiple means of action and expression—physical action, expression and communication, and executive function. (Cast, 2018)

You can access a visual representation of these neural networks in this [UDL infographic](#) from CAST. The networks are defined as the “how”, “why”, and “what” of learning, respectively.

Our show was a fully interactive one. Audience members (mostly comprised of school groups) were provided with a social story in video and paper forms before the show so that they would understand where they were going and what they would see. For example, one category on this sheet (and video) contained characters. My character’s name would be clearly written, and adjacent with it would be a clear image of me in costume. In the video, each character is introduced with verbal narration. They were also given video and sound footage of the songs so that they could sing along with us. The show incorporated elements of American Sign Language (ASL), musical instruments, and simple follow-along dance moves that were also demonstrated prior to the show. We provided a wide variety of seating: room to stand and roam when desired, comfortable chairs both with arms and without, soft carpeted floors, and spacious wheelchair accessibility. Our audience members (neurodiverse and neurotypical alike) could help us design our sets, change the seasons, experience the senses in each season through smell, touch, sound, and even be part of the script. During the show, audience members had an agenda with what the show would consist of, multiple “quiet rooms” that they could go to if they ever felt overstimulated, and buckets of fidget toys at their disposal. “Nature guides” were played by Long Island University actors who would help students on an individual basis if they needed assistance getting to a quiet room, toy, or prop. They also encouraged participation to the extent at which each student felt comfortable. Most importantly, our show was a “no-shushing” show. Students were able to vocalize, self-

soothe, “stim,<sup>1</sup>” wander, speak, sing, and move with the actors.

All of these activities followed the Universal Design for Learning almost precisely, which seems to be a theme in theatre-making for all audiences. Students who participated in the show had their affective networks of the brain stimulated through multiple modes of engagement and interest, including sensory props involving the seasons (e.g. ice packs for cold winter snow, roses with floral scents to represent the smells of spring, and crunchy fall leaves to touch and throw). Their recognition networks were activated by displaying information about the seasons in a variety of ways: pre-show resources detailing what was to happen at the show, a visual agenda always present during the performance, and verbal repetition of what was to come next and review of what has happened already. Finally, the strategic networks of the brain were activated through allowing the audience members to express their feelings about what they were learning in multiple modalities: through dance, song, verbally answering questions during or after the show, or even simple head nods or body cues.

After the show, cast members were able to speak one-on-one with the teachers and students who came and participated. Many students were overjoyed to be a part of the show and help Natura along her journey through the seasons. They cited that they “finally were able to dance!” loved the songs, were a big help to the stage, and many had a particular season they rooted for throughout the show. Teachers spoke to us about finally being able to go on an engaging field trip with these students, as oftentimes these students had to stretch to fit the traditional field trip environment by enforcing quietness and stillness. This time, a show was specifically made for them, and it meant a lot to have leadership opportunities, a safe space, and a fun and enriching show to stimulate both play and learning. There was also a special comfort found in the way that the show provided opportunities for self-advocacy. Students participated in any way pleasurable to them without pressure or judgement, and could opt-out at any time.

It seemed so simple during the show to make it universally accessible to audiences of all kinds. Soft lighting simply took lowering a light cue, gentle instrumental music was easy to adjust to, fidget toys

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<sup>1</sup> Stimming includes “self-stimulating behaviors, usually involving repetitive movements or sounds,” as defined by Healthline.

can be purchased in bulk at 50 pieces for less than \$20, a social story took 30 minutes of the Assistant Stage Manager's time to make, and "quiet rooms" were rooms adjacent to the theatre that incorporated couches and chairs that weren't being used elsewhere. All in all, the cost and time of adjusting a small-scale show to make it more accessible would hypothetically be less than \$50 and an hour of time. I decided to find a Broadway budget and compare how much monetary damage this would cause. I came across a budget for the musical *Kinky Boots* on Broadway in 2013 to use as a general example. According to Hal Luftig (Fierberg & Fitzpatrick, 2017), a lead producer on *Kinky Boots*, their Broadway show had a budget of around \$13.5 million. He cites that "Theatre Expenses" (e.g. front of house, box office, ushers, custodians, etc.) make up 18% of this budget. 18% of a \$13.5 million budget comes out to \$2,340,000. To pay a videographer or social media developer for regularly-updated social stories to be provided both physically and online, a surplus of fidget toys and their upkeep (bonus points for ones that are aesthetically related to the show), additional time for sound and lighting designers to provide alternate light cues, and additional rehearsals and regular accessibility-related professional development for actors, production teams, and staff, it could hypothetically cost less than 1% of the "Theatre Expenses" budget (\$23,400). If that doesn't sound like enough, Luftig cited that 17.9% of the show's budget goes to "Additional Expenses" (e.g. press appearances, day-to-day expenses, parties, etc.). That's \$2,416,500, even more than "Theatre Expenses." If price isn't a determining factor, then why do Broadway shows remain inaccessible to all audiences?

## **DEFINING "NEURODIVERSITY"**

In order to further delve into the issue of ableism seen in Broadway shows, we must first explore the definition and use of the term "neurodiversity." Neurodiversity was first coined by sociologist Judy Singer in the 1980s. She used it with two purposes: to be "an addition to the categories of intersectionality thus an analytical lens for examining social issues such as inequity and discrimination," and "an umbrella term as a possible name for a civil rights movement for the neurological minorities beginning to coalesce around the pioneering work of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Movement," (Singer, n.d.). Singer

now advocates for the use of “neurodiverse” as a political term with a focus on social justice rather than a scientific term to diagnose an individual. Modern neurodiversity research and education has built upon this idea, using it as an aid to diagnose neurological conditions. In the instance of “neurodiverse” versus “neurotypical,” “neurodiverse” is recently defined by Baumer & Frueh at Harvard Medical School as “the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities,” (2021).

For purposes of this essay, I will be using Baumer & Frueh’s definition of neurodiversity, highlighting those with neurological differences that are oftentimes put at a deficit because of society’s unfair emphasis on ability. I would also like to acknowledge that I am by no means an expert on neurological psychology or education with students with neurodiversities. My experience with education with these populations primarily lies in college-level coursework, relationships with friends and their family members with neurodiversities, and my personal involvement with *Branching Out*. But I aim to use my privilege as a theatre artist and student at NYU Steinhardt to endeavor to change the way society views a theatre-going audience.

## **BROADWAY & ABLEISM**

Upon further reflection of *Branching Out* being the first time I’ve ever encountered sensory-friendly theatre, I began questioning the lack of representation for neurodiverse audiences in big Broadway houses, let alone my own theatre productions that I’ve worked on. I wondered if I was falsely imagining the purpose of Broadway, or theatre at all. I curiously Googled the question, “What is the purpose of theatre?” and the first answer to pop up was from the website of Acting Studio Chicago. It listed the first answer as: “Theatre helps us to see a different perspective from our own.” The second answer was: “Theatre reminds us that we are not alone.” Then why are so many left out of it? Not only with casting, but also with audiences? Many discussions about populations with neurodiversities have been held before, oftentimes deeming society as the population who creates the barriers to which these populations must overcome. Broadway shows and their

advertisements are perpetuating these barriers by flaunting “acceptance,” “family fun for everyone,” and “today’s America,” while leaving an entire community out of it. For example, [an advertisement for the musical \*Dear Evan Hansen\*](#) shows a boy with cast on his arm. *Dear Evan Hansen* is emblazoned across his shirt and “a new musical for the outsider in us all” is written on the cast (Polk & Co., n.d.). In another example, [an advertisement for the musical \*Waitress\*](#) shows a man and woman rolling dough together over text that reads, “*Waitress*, the romantic musical comedy.” Above them, in all caps, the advertisement reads, “EVERYONE DESERVES A NICE SLICE OF HAPPINESS” (TodayTix.com, 2023). And in a final example (as seen in Figure 1), this advertisement for the musical *Come from Away* proclaims, “THIS IS THE SHOW WE ALL NEED RIGHT NOW.”



Figure 1: Advertisement for London's *Come from Away* (used with permission of Lauren Fee, Junkyard Dog Productions)

I remembered hearing about The Theatre Development Fund (TDF, 2022) and its autism-friendly performances, and checked to see if they were still happening. I found out that in all of 2022, TDF only provided 3 performances of Broadway shows for neurodiverse audiences. Not only are there only 3 performances, but there is also only one performance of each of three different shows, and they all occur on a Sunday at 1pm. If a parent or caregiver is unavailable on Sundays at 1pm, they are out of luck until perhaps next year—if the show they are interested in is funded enough by TDF’s donors to hold another sensory-friendly show. To provide some more statistics on how unfair the ratio of sensory-friendly performances to the



neurodiverse population is, 1 in 44 children has been identified with ASD according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023). Also according to the CDC, about 1 in 6 (17%) children aged 3–17 years were diagnosed with a developmental disability from 2009-2017. This is a significant population of people to be barred from being a theatre-going audience. To quote Mickey Rowe, one of the first actors with autism to play a character with autism in theatre:

If all things were equally accessible, you would expect to see one autistic in sixty-eight employees of any company in the US. Because small talk is so important in current interviews and auditions, this doesn't happen. But it would happen if things were more accessible. And we can help to make it what we see in the future by acknowledging and realizing that not everyone's brain is wired the same way; by acknowledging neurodiversity exists. (2015)

Not only do Broadway shows exclude neurodiverse audiences, but they also bar audiences with physical handicaps. Broadway theatres are required by law to provide accommodations for audiences with mobility impairments, but it is still cited that audiences with physical handicaps “will often find it is something of an ordeal to actually get seated” (New York Show Tickets Inc., 2022). Most Broadway theatres have no elevators, so “handicap seats” are typically restricted to the orchestra in the rear or extreme sides of the theatre. Some Broadway theatres even lack bathroom access to wheelchair users, causing them to have to leave the theatre to track down one outside of it. Blogger Karin Willison, an avid theatregoer who uses a power wheelchair, writes a blog consisting of tips to seeing a Broadway show as a wheelchair user. One tip she highlights is “Expect to find basic disability access, not full ADA compliance,” (Willison, n.d.). She mentions that one will most likely encounter “steep ramps, tight corners, and oddly sloped floors,” making it a treacherous endeavor just to be seated. These statistics show that Broadway theatres, even modern-day ones, expect audiences to be able-bodied and neurotypical.

Explicit here is the idea that society puts up these barriers that cause disability: the individuals themselves should not be at a disability by simply wanting to see a show. Oftentimes, society at a greater

whole is unable to provide equitable accommodations for all people. This is a different way of defining “disability,” which many refer to as the “social model of disability.” Instead of the disability being something that is a problem to be fixed, it is only a disability because society has created a disabling environment that does not allow the individual to participate in the world. Again, to reference UDL, the theatre environment should be the one stretching—not the audience members themselves.

I spoke with Courtney J. Boddie, the Director of Education & School Engagement at the New Victory Theatre in New York City, about her professional experience with inclusivity in the theatre community, the Broadway community, and beyond. I asked her why she thought Broadway theatres were not as inclusive as they could be all the time, to which she answered: “Ableism, capitalism, ...as a society, we’re just so rooted in ableism.” When asked if there’s a future for Broadway where inclusive performances are the norm, she shared that she wants to believe that it can get better, not only with accessibility, but with the way actors are treated as well. We discussed briefly the parallels between sensory-friendly performances and “blackout performances” (performances that are specifically for Black audiences). It seemed that instead of creating a more inclusive environment, it actually worked against the producers’ intentions.

...I get it, but that’s what I’m saying, like, it’s the same with sensory-friendly performances, right? We’re saying, “This performance is the only performance that you can go to,” as opposed to saying, “We are creating a space where many people in the audience would like these supports.” But how do we think about what that means for all of the performances? I can’t make that particular performance, what is my experience going to be on a different date? How are you thinking about that? (C. J. Boddie, personal communication, March 25, 2022)

This comment caused me to think about how we can change the mentality of theatregoing as a whole. How can we create a community that is inclusive, rather than exclusive?

But this does not go to say that there are no theatre companies in the New York City Broadway community leading the initiative to include people of all abilities. I also had the pleasure of speaking with Jennifer

DiBella, the Director of Education at Roundabout Theatre Company, about the non-profit's role in the disability community. Jennifer shares that, "Roundabout is a better organization, and a richer organization, when we are inclusive and accessible to all." Roundabout has been broadening their horizons to further include theatregoers who are neurodiverse beyond just holding one or two family-friendly relaxed performances a year. They provide relaxed performances for each show they produce, so that the stigma around "othering" adults with disabilities is erased. Jennifer even expressed that a relaxed performance should be a constant:

A relaxed performance should just be the norm...I would love that every performance is a relaxed performance. That we create an environment that's part of the fabric and the culture of theatregoing that is about: Doesn't matter who you are. How you experience the art is the way that you're experiencing art, that's the right way to experience it. There's no "right" way. You know, there's no "wrong" way or "right" way to experience art. (J. DiBella, personal communication, March 24, 2022)

Not only has Roundabout been seeking a more inclusive environment for their audience population, but they have also been making an active effort to highlight and produce work made by actors, playwrights, and directors who are neurodiverse through their recent Reverb Festival which they hope to revive annually. In this festival, work is made accessible: ASL interpretation, captioning, and audio description are present, descriptive image captioning is [explicitly displayed](#) on the front of the program, and disability activist partnerships are promoted (such as EPIC Players, Arts for All Abilities Consortium, and DreamStreet Theatre Company). But their work does not stop here. Jennifer expressed that though Roundabout has been making strides within the disability community, there is still a way to go with universally designing their theatregoing experience so that it is "for them, all the time" instead of just one performance at a time. She also shared that moving forward, there needs to be an emphasis placed on hiring more staff from the disability community. Jennifer hopes that Roundabout can learn from what they have successfully accomplished—but just because they've completed one initiative does not mean that they will stop. They continue to ask the question, "Who's missing?" in order to

build as inclusive and representative of an environment as possible.

## **UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR THEATREGOING**

I would like to propose a “Universal Design for Theatregoing” in order to rethink the theatre space as a whole, to advocate for the neurodiverse audience, and to obliterate the stigma against audience members with disabilities. To include a disclaimer, I am not the first person to ever propose such an idea. Dramaturgs and theatre artists such as Andrea Kovich (2021) and Lynne B. Silverstein (2020) have proposed similar methods to further include all theatregoers in theatrical spaces. But large-scale change has still not come, so I aim to continue this conversation and push it to the forefront, especially with our new generation of theatre artists and producers. I have spoken to many folks now about small steps theatre companies are taking to further include all populations. But I don’t think theatre can be completely accessible without an entire overhaul of theatre spaces. Sure, one theatre company can hold a relaxed performance each season—but unless they build an elevator and designate more diverse room for accessible seating, is it really that inclusive of a space?

My lead motive for this radical design was inspired by Jennifer DiBella’s question: “Who’s missing?” There are many folks missing from the theatre community. A litany of all these people could take up an entire dissertation. As both Jennifer DiBella and Courtney J. Boddie both expressed: sensory-friendly or relaxed performances should be the norm in theatre spaces instead of one-off performances. Originally, when beginning to write this paper, I thought I would come up with lists of “Short-Term Goals” and “Long Term Solutions” for theatre practitioners, teaching artists, directors, producers, and architects to use when designing a show and keeping its audience in mind. But after exploring this issue in depth, it has come to light that a truly inclusive theatre space would take effort from all production parties alike. The only way to truly break open the theatre community would be a complete revamp.

What would this reimagining of a theatre space look like, under Universal Design for Theatregoing? I created a graphic based upon the principles of Universal Design for Learning to more clearly articulate this vision, as seen in Figure 2.

## Universal Design for Theatregoing (1/2)

| Engagement                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Representation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Provide options for <b>Recruiting Interest</b> through representation of the diverse disability community in production &amp; creative teams, thus creating a representative and intersectional space for all</p> <p>Provide options for <b>Self-Regulation</b> by challenging the mentality of being quiet and still during a show by explicitly allowing for a range of vocal, physical, and/or emotional responses without worry of patron judgement, providing space for all audience members to go to with a variety of sensory resources, relaxed performance options, hiring audience support staff to be present at each show to best support audience &amp; production team needs</p> | <p>Provide options for <b>Perception</b> through providing access to differentiated auditory and visual information at every show</p> <p>Provide options for <b>Language &amp; Symbols</b> through providing the audience with accessible social stories in multiple languages and media (e.g. text, video, sound, images)</p> <p>Provide options for <b>Comprehension</b> through pre-show educational workshops and post-show talkbacks, extensive visual show information in advertisements &amp; in the theater, &amp; holding touch tours of props and set pieces pre-show</p> |

Figure 2: Universal Design for Theatregoing, based upon the UDL Networks

I would like to emphasize that though this information was consolidated into a graphic organizer, these are not the only ways that Broadway shows can provide engagement, representation, and action & expression. If anything, these are big ideas that need to be implemented in each Broadway production very specifically and intentionally.

I spoke with Lisa Carling, the Director of Accessibility Programs at the TDF, to learn more about how TDF has been providing accessibility for its audience, and what's holding Broadway shows back

## Universal Design for Theatregoing (2/2)

| Action & Expression                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Goals                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Provide options for <b>Physical Action</b> through providing differentiated seating (e.g. every seat in the theatre being either removable or adjustable to accommodate audiences of all mobilities), accessible bathrooms on each level, smooth ramps, elevators &amp; assistive technologies in every theater, including rehearsal spaces &amp; backstage, opening theatre spaces early and closing them late to allow audiences to skip lines &amp; move at their own pace</p> <p>Provide options for <b>Executive Functions</b> by earnestly surveying theatregoers to see what production teams could do better &amp; more inclusively</p> | Theatre spaces that are...                                                                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Representative and Inclusive</b> of folks of all abilities across all ages                           |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Accessible</b> for all before the show, during the show, and after the show                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Constantly changing and modernizing</b> with research and surveys of what would best serve audiences |

from establishing an accessible environment for every show. She shared that in order to hold a relaxed performance, organizations such as TDF must first buy out the entire theatre, a feat that they must “budget to lose money on” (Carling). Carling shared that money for TDF’s autism-friendly performances mostly come from foundations and individual donors. TDF then must pick and choose what shows this will happen for and when based on finances and audience interest (audiences are surveyed after each performance to find out what they would like to see next). Thus, many shows chosen are family-friendly, something that perhaps not every single adult theatregoer would choose.

Before COVID, TDF was able to hold 6 autism-friendly shows each season. I asked Lisa Carling if she thought a Broadway community where sensory-friendly performances and general public performances could be combined as the norm would be possible in the

future, to which she shared:

We stand by a very protected environment, a “no apology zone,” as one parent with tears in his eyes said. We wanna make sure it’s a supportive, judgement-free, loving environment. So, can ticket sales ever be open to the general public? I don’t think we’re there yet as a society. We don’t wanna put our families in a situation where they’re made to feel defensive or embarrassed or uncomfortable about explaining why their child or adult is stimming, or singing, or talking back to the actors, or getting up. I mean—hey just need to relax and be themselves, which is important to us. (Carling, personal communication, March 25, 2022)

A running theme throughout the interviews I’ve held has been that society-at-large is what is causing this problem (the social model of disability). This is not a new concept: society has historically been built for able-bodied and neurotypical folks, ostracizing others. The idea of holding more sensory-friendly and relaxed performances under the Universal Design for Theatregoing is how I aim to normalize this kind of theatre, and destigmatize certain audience members from being “othered.” Under “Engagement,” I also challenge the idea that patrons must remain quiet and still throughout a performance, whether it be a relaxed performance or not. If audience members who do have a bias that each patron should remain still and quiet during a performance are able to challenge the societal idea that there is a “correct” way to behave in a theatre, perhaps it could have a ripple effect on society as a whole.

What can we do to fund changing society’s idea of theatregoing? If we are to use this Universal Design for Theatregoing, one that relies on accessibility (especially physically), where does the money come from? On TDF’s website, a list of top-ranking donors is published. At the top \$100,000 and above level are: New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, National Endowment for the Arts, The New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addictions, The New York City Council Committee on Veterans, and The Taft Foundation. According to Robert E. Wankel (President and co-CEO of the Shubert Organization), the cost to build a new Broadway theatre in 2017 was over \$150 million. Perhaps a complete overhaul of every

single Broadway theatre at once is unfeasible—but there are shifts that Broadway shows can make that are absolutely doable and necessary. Taking the steps of providing safe spaces during shows, hiring more folks from the disability community (especially in positions of leadership), installing more modes of visual and auditory accessibility, and taking all audiences into account are ground-breaking steps that could yield drastic change in the mentality of Broadway producers and theatregoers alike. The goal is to completely remove these barriers from the disability community, so that every theatre lover can have a meaningful experience in their own way.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Christine V. Skorupa (she/her) is completing her Master's in Educational Theatre (Dual Certification in Theatre & English) at NYU Steinhardt. She received her BA in Theatre (Acting/Directing) with a minor in Education from Binghamton University. At Binghamton, she received a Research Scholarship through the Summer Scholars and Artists program which she used to study at the Stella Actor Studio to gain a broader understanding of theatre education as a whole. Over the past few years, she has been teaching theatre to students from grades Pre-K through 8th grade while also performing. On stage, she was recently seen as Natura in *Branching Out* at LIU Post, a new sensory immersive theatre production. Currently, she is playing Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with NYU's Shakespeare to Go company.