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# A New System of Theater: On Accessibility vs. Accommodation in Entertainment

**Introduction: "Entertainment is a basic human right."**

These words were spoken by Maddy Bagnall, the executive director of Seesaw Theater, a student-run, Northwestern-University-based theater for young audiences (TYA) group, during our interview on October 26, 2024. The Seesaw Theater program (often shortened to just "Seesaw"), as the primary focus of this paper, occupies a unique position within the TYA space in designing interactive and immersive theater for autistic, neurodivergent, or otherwise developmentally disabled elementary-school-aged children in the Chicagoland area. Within the scope of my general research topic on intersections between autism and music, Bagnall's sentiment proves unusual. Indeed, the majority of present autism research frames entertainment within therapeutic lenses, often with an implicit directive to the management or elimination of neurotype symptoms. Bagnall's statement instead appeals more towards entertainment as facilitating well-being, regardless of therapeutic applications.

Perhaps, however, these two approaches are not entirely disjunct. Entertainment, and specifically theater, mimics elements of "pretend play," a thoroughly researched topic within developmental psychology. Research precedence exists for the effects of pretend play on

emotional cognition,[1] generic information acquisition,[2] and social abilities,[3] that while largely focused on toddlerhood and infancy, may reasonably apply to elementary-age children given the documented prominence of pretend play past early childhood.[4] Most Western countries evidence a perception of knowledge acquisition via education as a bona fide human right, while emotional and social factors situate centrally in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, proving no less important. If entertainment indeed functions centrally to human development, its exclusion from human rights gambits may well be waived.

These realizations do not yet unite therapeutic and developmental perspectives on entertainment in neurodivergence, nor do they address the nature of the entertainment itself. Within our modern, digital world, entertainment of many types is accessible to most middle-class families – does that not render the purpose of Seesaw redundant to preexistent resources? According to Bagnall, the answer is no. Entertainment of all mediums emerges from social constraints, generally systematically via catering to a neuro-normative perspective. While neurodiversity becomes (thankfully) increasingly accommodated within the entertainment industry, neuro-normative constraints still regulate its cumulative impact on audiences, often incongruent with autistic or otherwise neurodiverse cognition. Seesaw's intentions, rather than accommodation, are to develop a model for what Bagnall terms "a system of theater" wherein

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[1] Sylvie Richard, Anne Clerc-Georgy, and Edouard Gentaz, "Pretend play-based training improves some socio-emotional competences in 5–6-year-old children: A large-scale study assessing implementation," *Acta Psychologica* 238 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2023.103961 (accessed December 17, 2024).
[2] Shelbie L. Sutherland and Ori Friedman, "Just pretending can be really learning: Children use pretend play as a source for acquiring generic knowledge," *Developmental Psychology* vol. 49, iss. 9 (2013): 1660-1668. https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/just-pretending-can-be-really-learning-children/docview/1151919992/se-2?accountid=14503 (accessed December 17, 2024).
[3] Anne-Catherine Jaggy, et al., "The impact of social pretend play on preschoolers' social development: Results of an experimental study," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* Vol. 64, no. 3 (2023): 13-25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.01.012 (accessed December 17, 2024).
[4] Eric D. Smith and Angeline S. Lillard, "Play on: Retrospective Reports on the Persistence of pretend Play Into Middle Childhood," *Journal of Cognition and Development* vol. 13, iss. 4 (2012): 524-549. https://doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2011.608199 (accessed December 17, 2024).

the benefits of mainstream theater to neuro-normative audiences may be analogously reaped by a largely neurodivergent one.

It is my belief that Seesaw's proposed theater system, practically modeled via their shows, rehearsal process, and general organizational aims and attitudes, proves effective and generalizable, consistent with current psychological and developmental theory. As such, in this article I seek to explore various elements of Seesaw's approach, their relationship with pre-established theories on childhood development along with their therapeutic potential, and to model their more widespread implementation towards universalization of entertainment as a human right. As such, I will begin by providing a theoretical basis on neurodivergent theory of mind and related behavioral or personal factors, heavily relying on Thomas Kitwood's conception of *personhood*. I will follow with an ethnographic presentation of a Seesaw show, collated through my interviews with the organization's executive director Maddy Bagnall, 2025 Winter main-stage show director Andrew McCarthy, and Graybill Partington, Seesaw's head adventure guide (HAG – a position I will explain later), as well as various resources they supplied. Finally, I will combine these phenomenological observations with the proposed theories to assess the efficacy of Seesaw's system of theater, and its utilization of music, towards empowering neurodivergent child audiences. To that end I will explore how Seesaw reinforces audience personhood through covert disciplinary practices, fostering of implicit sociality, and establishment of an accessible system of morality, choice, and their respective consequences. My argument here is not conclusive, but hypothetical, abductively urging the pursuit of further research on accessible entertainment. I do not seek to reshape societal approaches to entertainment at large, but to ground Seesaw's systematic model within a robust psychological framework and posit its generalizability to other mediums. The emergent sentiment of this

research asserts that universalizing accessible entertainment paves the path to a just, healthier world, and that other accessible entertainment organizations best follow in Seesaw's footsteps.

**Social Development: Internal and External Challenges**

In order to identify the benefits of neurodivergent-directed models of entertainment, we must first identify the insufficiencies of its absence – that is, where do the dissonances between autistic cognition and the normative world arise, and what are their precise consequences. To establish these paradigms, let us examine a congruent mode of neurodiverse art engagement through Florida State University's Music-Play Project, also known as the Exploratory World Music Playground (E-WoMP), facilitated primarily by ethnomusicologists Benjamin Koen and Michael Bakan. In E-WoMP, participants are provided with an open space wherein several instruments are laid out, and minimal direction on what to do. They are allowed to run free and engage (or not engage) with instruments as they please and seek guidance from instructors at their own behest. In describing the program,[5] Koen and Bakan focus mainly on three factors: the "nocebo effect" – unjust negative stigmatization of autistic behavior, a lack of discipline, and on Thomas Kitwood's personhood theory.

The authors' presentation of the nocebo effect rings true yet contains several problematic elements. Autistic children, according to Koen and Bakan, possess inherent abilities often overlooked or negatively connotated due to negative perceptions of autism in broader society. Behaviors expressing such abilities occur regardless but are suppressed independently of acceptability through paradigmatic emphasis "on inappropriate behavior of the child associated

[5] Benjamin D. Koen, Michael B. Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness: A Child-Ability-Centered Approach to Sociomusical Healing and Autism Spectrum 'Disorders'," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethnomusicology*, edited by Benjamin D. Koen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 461-481.

with autism rather than inappropriateness of the neurotypical person's response that is too often mirrored back to the child."[6] The stated therapeutic aims of E-WoMP are not to "cure or treat the children, but rather… [nurture] their [preexisting] capacities for self-efficacy and social interaction, and [engender] a culture of acceptance, possibility, openness, and inclusion."[7] While this sentiment is kindhearted, Koen and Bakan demonstrate here a dangerous preoccupation with the perception of autistic individuals by normative society[8] over the inherent conditions enabling positive development. For instance, one vignette they provide tells of a reclusive young boy named Mark, often struggling with social engagement. Mark's demeanor, however, changed drastically once allowed to engage freely with drums brought over to a dinner party by Bakan, allegedly initiating a spiral of personal growth which ended up with Mark being "no longer on the spectrum at all."[9] Bakan and Koen credit this shift to an environment which emphasized "[aspects] of [Mark's] being that had nothing to do with… limiting constructs of 'disorders'"[10] – it was not Mark's inherent developmental challenges that hindered his growth, but the perception of his disorder by his parents, caretakers, and his immediate circle which placed a cap on his abilities; in essence, Koen and Bakan perceive that the label of "disorder" was responsible for his ASD. The authors neglect to question whether other elements of a music-play environment fostered this development more implicitly, and that Mark's autistic cognition was never eliminated, only its expression via behavioral limitations – and perhaps that emphasis on inherent ability may be setting some autistic individuals up for failure. As such, I will implement the

[6] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 464.
[7] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 463.
[8] This same attitude is also evident in Michael Bakan, *Speaking for Ourselves: Conversations on Life, Music, and Autism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[9] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 474. Note that the authors' implication of "curing autism" has troubling clinical implications that transcend the scope of this paper.
[10] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 475.

theoretical basis used by Koen and Bakan, with some crucial modifications to focus on more internal dynamics.

What might such alternatives be? Bakan and Koen do cite the work of psychologist Thomas Kitwood regarding the establishment of *personhood* construct – a validation of one's ability to exist within a wider social system, initially developed towards ethical handling of dementia patients. While the authors' implementation of Kitwood's ideas models mostly their external, applied influence, personhood theory may prove a fruitful avenue for modeling internal developmental challenges too. Kitwood lists a plethora of social forces which function to limit personhood in neurodivergent individuals – I provide the more relevant of these and their definitions below as quoted by Koen and Bakan:[11]

- Outpacing: providing information, presenting choices, etc., at a rate too fast for a person to understand; putting them under pressure to do things more rapidly than they can bear.
- Invalidation: failing to acknowledge the subjective reality of a persons' experience, and especially what they are feeling.
- Banishment: sending a person away, or excluding them – physically [and socially] … psychologically [or emotionally].

These join with more self-evident processes such as disempowerment, labelling, stigmatization, ignoring, and Bakan and Koen's own (questionable) contribution of despiritualization, all appearing in their model to carry the brunt of the blame for developmental challenges in autism. While these disabling processes are definitely at play in the applied external world autistic individuals inhabit, the three previously mentioned – outpacing, invalidation, and banishment –

[11] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 468.

align neatly with documented internal challenges of autistic development surrounding theory of mind.

According to psychologists Peter and Jessica Hobson, there exist a plethora of studies which evidence autistic individuals to struggle around development of theory of mind – an understanding of one's own respective cognition relative to and distinctly from others', responsible for social emotions, communication, and other executive and social functions. While the cause of these challenges has not been narrowed down to a singular, consistent phenomenon, and while internal factors, such as biological developmental divergences, likely play a role, the Hobsons suggest intersections between internal and external factors most certainly inhibit development as well. Rather than superficial labelling, however, the Hobsons refer to the inevitable reality of neurodivergent brains' uniqueness within a normative society, as such making it difficult for the autistic individual to relate and model social emotions relative to themselves. In other words, the Hobsons' model theory of mind as a phenomenological application of observed stimuli to internal cognition: "In identifying with someone else, the self not only responds to another individual's bodily-expressed orientation from that other person's stance, but also assimilates that orientation so that it becomes a possible mode of relating for the self."[12] The incongruousness of the autistic consciousness with the cognition of nearly all surrounding individuals inhibits this process, resulting in an impacted theory of mind. Koen and Bakan covertly evocate this mechanism in their observation that a central impairment in autistic communication is the "inability to co-create culture"[13] and hence naturally integrate into a wider society. These observations align with the mentioned aspects of Kitwood's personhood model.

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[12] Peter R. Hobson and Jessica A. Hobson, "Autism: Self and others," in *Understanding Other Minds: Perspectives from developmental social neuroscience* 3rd ed., edited by Simon Baron-Cohen et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 408.

[13] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 474.

An autistic individual's internal world undergoes invalidation by its incongruousness to surrounding individuals. A society constructed around normative sentiments inhibits learning and behavioral development, mimicking an outpacing phenomenon. The interactions of discrepant cognitive and social systems mitigates proper communication, leading to social exclusion, or banishment.

There is no doubt that external stigmatization plays a role in autistic social development, as Koen and Bakan assert – however, we must not forget that internal factors implicated within inevitable external contexts may also pose developmental challenges. Given that entertainment plays a significant role in the development of social cognition and therefore intertwines with theory of mind, I propose that a model of entertainment catered to neurodivergent cognition must combat these inevitable external influences barricading personhood. To counteract invalidation, the impulses of the child must not be denied but reinforced. To counteract outpacing, the play environment must be comprehensible, and the child's agency to affect it must be predictable and accessible. To counteract banishment, socialization between diverse neurotypes must be facilitated, and discrepancies must be overcome. Fortunately, Seesaw's system of theater and its utilization of music answers these three criteria aptly.

**Seesaw: How does it Work?**

Seesaw was founded in 2013 by Melanie Gertzman and Anna Marr, two sophomores in the school of communication. Its initial name, "Theater Stands with Autism," was later amended to Seesaw to convey the broader focus of the program on neurodivergences and developmental disabilities beyond autism, though autism remains their primary focus. The scale of the program changed drastically as well, from running one show a year to single-digit sized audiences to two

shows a year accommodating several dozen children. One of these two shows, the main-stage show, takes place at Northwestern University in the winter, whereas the traveling show, where the cast visits and performs at Chicagoland schools' special-needs classes, takes place in the spring.[14]

As opposed to more traditional theater models, Seesaw shows take place in an open space, where action is distributed across several stations, each inhabited by different characters, props, or activities. Audience members (or as they are often affectionately referred to by Seesaw members, 'kiddos') are free to roam between the stations as they please, accompanied by an Adventure Guide (AG) – cast members assigned to each child, accompanying them throughout the experience. More generally, the organization is split into a backstage crew handling lights, sounds, and props, a music team positioned at a corner of the show space playing music as needed, a cast of characters positioned in different stations, and a supervising group, including the Head Adventure Guide (HAG), observing the happenings from the sidelines and intervening to help as necessary.

Despite the open-endedness of the show space, Seesaw shows generally contain a plot, unfolding throughout the different stations. Plot events are bound to a coordinated schedule, where different stations and their relevant activities, songs, or character moments take place. Plots are usually simple and nonlinear, involving a small cast of recognizable, unique characters, with problems audience members can help solve. For example, *Epic Magic Quest*, Seesaw's 2024 winter main-stage show, had audience members search for and encounter Drake the Dragon in his cave, accompany him on a magical quest in the fictional land "Whimsia," and eventually being flown back home on the dragon's back. Throughout the quest, audience members

[14] As of fall of 2016, Seesaw also hosts Northwestern University's "Inclusive Theater Festival," where the organization invites a variety of speakers on the titular topic.

encounter archetypal fantasy characters, such as Faye the fairy, Allie the animal whisperer, Noa the Knight, Sage the Mage, and Billie the Bard, with whom they could interact via a song or an activity. These included Sage teaching audience members how to make a potion, encouraging them to mime different motions along with the process, or the bard reading magical runes from a ruin wall.

The position of the Adventure Guide is essential for the function and essence of Seesaw. During the rehearsal process, AG's are trained by the HAG and each show's director on ethical practices around disability, and on monitoring the safety while engaging their assigned audience members. Prior to each show, adventure guides receive information about the audience member with which they will be paired, generally provided by their teachers and caretakers. Notably, the role of the AG's is not to get audience members to follow the plot – rather, they serve the children's own needs, accompanying them through the plot if they wish, or engaging in other activities as requested, such as playing with props, interacting with characters, exploring the stations, reframing story moments in accordance to the child's interests, or simply running around the room.

AG's are also expected to provide for the audience members' physical and emotional wellbeing, though this responsibility is additionally carried by Seesaw's crew and design team. Prior to the several-week-long rehearsal process, the organization engages in a design process, led by a creative director. Andrew McCarthy, director of the upcoming 2025 winter main stage show *Into the Future*, explained in his interview that the safety and general wellbeing of audience members is an overarching concern from the process's inception. Small (swallowable) or hard (throwable) objects must be avoided, set pieces must be resilient and non-climbable, light colors are coordinated and soft, sound is quiet and localized so to be avoidable. Corollary to this

effort are elements designed to engage neurodivergent audience members, especially in light of their sensory needs: props usually make soft sounds and are scented with pleasant, nontoxic odorants, sets usually feature interactive elements or appealing textures (such as fuzzy foam lining the dragon's cave in *Epic Magic Quest*), and character costumes encourage sensory interaction, often using sequin flips.

To allow audience members to mentally adapt to the show environment, Seesaw members facilitate an assimilation process beginning long before the performance date. This begins with "Social Stories," wherein the kids are sent images of the show space, the characters in costumes, pictures of other cast members such as AG's, and a straightforward explanation on what to expect. Upon arriving to the show, audience members are taken to an assimilation room, a low sensory stimulation space where they are introduced to the characters, the story, and some basic rules (more on these later), often through song. Only then are they paired with their adventure guides and allowed into the show space.

Shows usually last around 45 minutes, including time spent in the assimilation room. To ease the kids back into everyday life, an outro song, reprising the assimilation room song, is sung by the characters as the kids gradually leave, guided by their caretakers.

**Validation: Illusion of Boundlessness**

A striking commonality between Seesaw and E-WoMP is their attitude towards discipline. Koen and Bakan make it clear that the Music Play Project's goal is non-didactic with regards to whether music is produced "correctly," instead drawing a distinction such that "the 'rules' of *musical play* are categorically different from… 'rules' of *playing music.*"[15] As such

[15] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 464.

they set up E-WoMP as an environment wherein no lessons are to be learned, and no form of behavior is more correct than others. Additionally, E-WoMP instructors endeavor to discourage parents from correcting their children's behavior or musical activities. The only explicit rules are explained at beginning of each session, and entirely relate to the children's physical safety, as well as culturally appropriate treatment of ethnic instruments.[16] In essence, the E-WoMP environment becomes defined by the introduction of a new, more bare system of expectations and rules compared to everyday life, subversively delineated via the introduction of rules themselves prior to each E-WoMP session.

An obvious parallel to this technique manifests through Seesaw's assimilation room, albeit more robustly. The assimilation room serves as a transitory region between everyday life and the show space, wherein expectations for this new environment are established. In contrast to E-WoMP, Seesaw's set of rules are even barer, stated as following according to Bagnall:

1. Stick with your Buddy throughout the show ("Buddy" supplementing the internal term AG when addressing the audience).
2. There's a lot of things to play with in Seesaw. When you are given an object to play with, you can either say "yes please!" or "no thank you!" (this is followed with a practical demonstration by the cast members.)
3. Haaaaaaave fun!

Evidently, rules 2 and 3 barely amount to rules at all, but rather reinforcements of impulses the children may have regardless. Establishing the show as one where audience members may accept or reject participation in planned events and activities via rule 2 differs greatly from everyday disciplinary environments such as schools, clubs, and in unfortunately many cases, children's

[16] Koen, Bakan, et al., "Personhood Consciousness," 472.

home environments. As such, by reinforcing the children's right to control their own experience, they become empowered, and their impulses validated. Rule 3 complements rule 2 by supporting the audience's reaction to fulfilling their impulses, again often suppressed within everyday life. These two rules become all the more significant considering the context blindness indicative of childhood autistic cognition – autistic children may be unaware that their impulses, emotions, and reactions were only disciplinarily discouraged due to their contextual circumstances, leading to their universal repression. Through rules 2 and 3, audience members receive a clear confirmation that their natural cognitive processes are valid, acceptable, and even desired.

Rule 1 provides the only true guideline audience members are expected to follow, and functions as an efficient supplement to E-WoMP's safety and ethics speech. Rather than placing any of the safety responsibilities on the participants while allowing supervisor intervention, Seesaw relegates that onus entirely off audience members. Instead, they are instructed to stick by an AG, already trained to account for the children's safety and wellbeing. The majority of this training process occurs through "proxying" sessions, wherein an experienced AG (the "proxy") assumes behavioral traits typical of Seesaw audience members. According to Andrew McCarthy, these may include prop collecting, non-verbalism, circumscribed interests (a restrictive fascination with a singular topic over all others, McCarthy reports Disney's *Frozen* is a common exemplar), or varying degrees of energy and mobility. The AG-in-training is then asked to manage the proxy's behavior in accordance with Seesaw's principles and approved techniques, followed by feedback from the proxy, other AG's, and the HAG.[17]

[17] Indeed, the idea of a neurotypical person modeling neurodivergent behavior may appear problematic, though I was reassured by Seesaw members that the goal of proxying is not emulation, but adaptation. That is, proxies engender qualities of neurodiversity while remaining true to their own personality, behavior, maturity, and neuro-normativity, only after lengthy and informative training. As such, problematic stereotypes and labeling of autistic cognition are avoided to the greatest extent possible given the inability to train on actual audience members.

My interview with Graybill Partington shed light on these guiding principles and techniques informing proxying. According to Partington, the three core tenets of the AG position are autonomy, fostering and validating the child's impulses, safety, both physically and emotionally, and creativity, the ability to adapt to the child's behavior and needs. In order to engender authenticity in proxies, they are instructed to follow their impulses with the expectation they will be validated rather than dismissed. In order to uphold these tenets and achieve consistent validation, AG's learn to practice "redirection" – a mode of setting boundaries covertly not through limiting the child's behaviors, but rather by proposing alternatives that may fulfill the same impulses. Kids interested in the sensation of damaging props may be offered alternative, more durable props, which provide similar sensations. Children wishing to escape the show space (often referred to as "elopers" in behavioral reports) may be physically redirected by AG's blocking the entrance, or offered other enticing activities within the space. Kids interested in throwing objects at other audience members may instead be offered softer, and less throwable props, or their AG might ask: "throw those at me instead!"

Redirection therefore becomes the only true method of establishing disciplinary boundaries during the Seesaw show, providing audience members with the illusion that all of their decisions, impulses, needs, and wants, have been answered and validated, or at the very least not rejected. Partington emphasized that AG's are trained to never say no even to the most dangerous impulses, so as to not initiate any repression of the children's wishes. Another significant consequence of this practice is that audience members need not be aware of any behavioral codes or disciplinary guidelines during the show, removing the potential for a frustrating misunderstanding of externally applied rules on their behalf. Even if they do not actively stick by their AG, whether because of unawareness or unwillingness, the AG's are

trained to follow their assigned audience members and match their energy, behavior, and interests.

This approach allows the rules presentation to become a negligible element of the show experience. It usually occurs during an instrumental vamp in the middle of the introductory song in the assimilation room, and is very brief. While audience members would likely be compelled to pay attention to the presentation due to the enticing song within which it occurs, Partington explains that in some ways the presentation and the rules within it are designed to be ignorable. The autonomy, safety, and creativity of the audience-AG dynamic will be maintained regardless, due to the AG's comprehensive training.

Seesaw shows, however, are not structureless environments. As already mentioned, shows run on strict schedules, especially considering several shows are performed to different audiences one after the other on certain days. As such, and in support of an emotionally healthier experience, the energy, stimulation levels, and emotional states of the children must be somehow managed. To achieve this without direct disciplinary actions, Seesaw often relies on the semiotic and eurhythmic qualities of music. While each show contains a different array of songs, some archetypes are consistent between all shows, including:

- Intro song: sung in the assimilation room, introducing the show concept, characters, and rules. *Epic Magic Quest's* intro tries to quell audience members' anxieties, asserting: "Let's go / Not a care or a worry / On our Epic Magic Quest!"
- A high-energy song: some audience members may have very high energy levels that may make it difficult to manage their behavior throughout the show. As such, most shows contain at least one song with a driving rhythm and lyrics encouraging audience members to move or dance around, creating a release of energy. One such example is "The Frog

Hop" from the spring 2024 traveling show *Pond*, where audience members are encouraged to "hop hop hoppity hop." (This song also states its purpose plainly via an experience likely relatable to high-energy audience members, often asked to repress their energy in accordance with social norms: "It can be hard to be a frog / Being told to sit and be a frog on a log / But all frogs know that the best days / are the days full of adventure and play.")

- A lullaby: the penultimate song of each show is a lullaby, serving the dual purpose of again lowering the energy of excited children, and preparing them emotionally for the show's ending, given lullabies' association with the end of a day. *Pond*'s "firefly lullaby" additionally instills in audience members that the validation they sensed within the Seesaw space extends into their everyday life: "You're not alone tonight / Especially once you realize / We light up the world, you and me / Just like our friendly fireflies."
- Outro song: as the audience members leave the show space, the cast vamps over an outro song, often a reprise of the intro song, saying goodbye to the children and enforcing a positive energy.

Beyond these particular song archetypes, music additionally plays the role of coaxing audience members to interact with the show's plot. While audience members are allowed and encouraged to follow their impulses regardless of their alignment with the show's planned story, the scheduled song's association with plot events happening at a particular station covertly draws attention there without outright asking audience members to comply with the designed story activities, in essence embodying another form of redirection. Children for whom the music is too loud or overstimulating (though music volumes are generally kept at a comfortable level) may at any time retreat to a designated quiet space, such as *Epic Magic Quest*'s "fairy tent." These

musical elements aim to substitute discipline with suggestive signifiers of recommended behavior, while mitigating energy levels and emotional states of the audience in support of AG's redirection efforts and the designed show experience.

The overall effect of this practice is a validation of the audience's internal world. AG's treat no impulse as unequivocally wrong or even dangerous (in fact, Partington's AG training presentations place the word "dangerous" in quotations, reinforcing this perspective), but as simply inferior, less exciting, or superseded by better ones. As such, the clearly delineated show space becomes a positive, reinforcing environment for the autistic child, wherein they need not worry about conforming to social norms and disciplinary guidelines, but rather explore and exercise their true selves. As Partington put it: "Their own shows are unique because of them!"

**Actions and Consequences: Making a Comprehensible World**

Validation seeks to empower autistic individuals' internal worlds and their expressions, enabled through a highly individualized approach to audience experience in Seesaw productions. If we are to model entertainment as a human right given its tendency towards knowledge acquisition, specifically with regards to social emotion and theory of mind awareness, the autistic child's internal world must engage with an external, social context. The challenge here for many autistic children is, once more, the "inability to co-create culture." Any interaction involving more than one party contains implicit, socially and cognitively defined rules, ones which do not always naturally integrate with autistic cognition, especially during childhood development. The autistic child's difficulty with establishing or adapting to this cooperative culture mirrors Kitwood's disabling force of outpacing, as the contextual information required for the agency to make informed social decisions often exists beyond the scope of an autistic child's

comprehension. The result is the same lack of social agency observed by Koen and Bakan, though while they argue it stems from a stigmatized ignorance of autistic ability, it is clearly additionally rooted in inevitable emerging dissonances between external reality and the internal neurodivergent condition. This paradigm embodies another insufficiency of applying neurotypical entertainment models to a neurodivergent audience: beyond the socially applied, impulse suppressing codes of behavior of many entertainment environments, most narrative based entertainment requires the ability to read and interpret enacted social situations through tone and body language, as well as exercise non-conceptual empathy – both skills with which many autistic children struggle.[18]

A system of theater seeking to provide the same benefits to neurodivergent audiences as normative theater provides to general audiences must therefore engage with scenarios wherein the consequences, rules, characterizations, and expectations of social situations exist within a communicative scope accessible without fully developed social skills. Through such scenarios, knowledge acquisition arises mechanistically alike to Social Stories (already briefly touched on earlier, as these are also employed to prepare audience members for the show-day experience), a technique defined by educational experts Alice Hammel and Ryan Hourigan as "short stories written for a person with autism to help them understand and behave appropriately in specific social situations."[19] In other words, by experiencing social scenarios in controlled, accessible, easy-to-read environments, autistic children can rehearse and model social emotions more clearly, to later be incorporated into less controlled interactions in everyday life. Their ultimate

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[18] Hobson and Hobson, "Autism: Self and others." This contrasts heavily with Michael Bakan's approach, who again claims difficulties with empathy are merely a perceived byproduct of stigmatization by neuro-normative individuals in *Speaking for Ourselves*,

[19] Alice M. Hammel and Ryan M. Hourigan, *Teaching Music to Students with* Autism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 49.

goal is to provide a “sense of normalcy and understanding” of social expectations, so that an autistic individual may later encounter them with more informed agency.

How do Seesaw shows provide said agency to neurodivergent children? As previously mentioned, Seesaw shows are largely improvised, surrounding a few preplanned plot points. Therefore, the characters within these shows can truly interact with audience members, and are trained similarly to AG’s towards accommodating their needs. Seesaw’s design team takes great care to ensure character appearances are approachable, often including enticing sensory elements in their costume designs, such as sequin flips and veils. Recognizing the overwhelming nature and difficulties associated with deciphering new people, audience members receive two introductions to the characters: once in the Social Stories sent to them long before the show, and once during the intro song in the assimilation room. The low-stimulation assimilation room environment allows audience members to absorb intro songs’ information independently of any sensory interference. The song’s lyrics convey key details about each character, presented alongside them entering center stage, hinting at their function within the plot. Consider, for instance, this segment from the intro song to *Epic Magic Quest*:

Billie’s our bard, she keeps us on key,

Allie makes friendships wherever we be,

Noah shields us

With Faye’s magic dust

And Sage’s magic wands,

We’re a team!

Audience members’ interactions with these characters occur in three forms: freeform interactions, prompted interactions, and scripted interactions. Freeform interactions occur

naturally and at any time throughout the show as audience members, accompanied by their AG's, may wander into and interact with characters' stations. Prompted interactions occur as part of the plot, though their solutions and unfolding are not necessarily planned. One example of this mode of interaction involves Faye the Fairy in *Epic Magic Quest*, who, upon audience members' arrival to her station, expresses unhappiness with her outfit's lack of color. Audience members may then attempt to solve her problem using various methods, at their own volition. They collect various colorful veils from around her station and drape them over her suit, provide her with other props to cheer her up, or, aided by their AG's, complement, encourage, or verbally support Faye. While the overall plot of the show is unaffected by Faye's ultimate feelings about her outfit, audience members are given the opportunity to affect her appearance, reinforcing their agency in the social situation through tangible, sensory means. Notably, most unscripted interactions rely on perceptible issues rather than social or emotional ones, guaranteeing their accessibility regardless of emotional development.

Scripted interactions have pre-planned solutions, and are generally consequential to the show's plot, as opposed to their unscripted or spontaneous counterparts. In order to ensure no audience members are left out of these story-significant events, shows usually employ a multi-medial approach to their communication, and base these issues on ones with which neurodivergent children may empathize. One example of such an interaction occurs in *Epic Magic Quest*'s Dragon Cave station, where Drake the Dragon complains that he cannot sleep, as he is scared of the thunder outside. His feelings are stated both literally and through the song associated with the station: "you're loved in here, you're loved in here / and the dragon's breath will keep us warm / and his wings will shield us from the coming storm." Reinforcing the experience are soft simulated thunder sounds, created by actors ruffling the foam on the outside

of the Dragon's Cave. Audience members may then help the dragon sleep by covering him in blankets, singing the lullaby with their AG's, or by joining the dragon in lying on the padded floor – all intuitive and flexible solutions which audience members may empathize with.

The contextualization of these problem-solving processes within flexible, relatable, and multi-modal presentations, often employing the semiotics of music, sensory information, and direct statements, allows these social situations to unfold in accessible, comprehensible ways for neurodivergent children. Their lasting impact, either on the plot of the show or on the characters themselves aligns the audience's engagement of these interactions to embody a social agency, often absent due to the outpacing phenomenon dominating the neurodivergent condition in normative society. The plurality of these interactions within each show are additionally instrumental: whereas more normative plots often require information to be processed, remembered, and integrated into a larger narrative as the story progresses, Seesaw's shows unfold in short story moments with widely different characters, such that if any audience member cannot relate or process one scenario, they would not be excluded from the rest of the show experience. As such, Seesaw's model of plot, consequence, and agency within theater is essential to the facilitation of knowledge acquisition within its neurodivergent audience, empowering them to approach everyday normative society with newfound confidence and experience.

**Social Integration and Cooperation**

We have already covered how Seesaw's system of theater combats the disabling mechanisms of invalidation and outpacing, both of which may sprout social inefficacy for the neurodivergent child. The result of these processes, embodied in banishment, represents a feedback loop, wherein social exclusion, regardless of its cause, breeds further social difficulty,

leading to a further lack of social integration. Recognizing that many of their audience members do not yet have sufficiently robust social understandings to engage in uncontrolled social situations, and that implicating them within such situations may generate frustration or unacceptable behavior, Seesaw instead attempts to combat the banishment spiral by nurturing social dynamics that retain individual agency and behavior through relying on the plurality of collective action. In other words, Seesaw engages audience members in social models wherein cooperative success is not measured through the interactions between audience members, but rather through the cumulative impact of their personal decision-making.

In effect, Seesaw shows attempt to establish what the Hobsons would term "Joint Engagement." Joint Engagement is an extension of the much more firmly established principle of Joint Attention, describing a social phenomenon wherein several independent individuals process and relate to the same information. Psychologists Henrike Moll and Andrew Meltzoff summarize present research in stating that regular attainment of Joint Attention in childhood "blossoms into the development of taking and understanding perspectives that follows in the coming months and years"[20] – aiding in the development of theory of mind. The Hobsons argue, however, that Joint Attention is wrongly modeled. If attention is an internal process, and if the observation of internal processes in others through external cues relies on a developed theory of mind, it cannot be that attention drives the developmental benefits observed by Moll and Meltzoff. Rather, the Hobsons credit these benefits to the external cues indicating common goals themselves, and term it accordingly as Joint Engagement.[21] The presence of cooperative behavior alone, regardless of

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[20] Henrike Moll and Andrew N. Meltzoff, "Joint Attention as the Fundamental Basis of Understanding Perspectives," in *Joint Attention: New Developments in Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, and Social Neuroscience*, edited by Axel Seeman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 394.

[21] Peter Hobson and Jessica Hobson, "Joint Attention or Joint Engagement? Insights from Autism," in *Joint Attention: New Developments in Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, and Social Neuroscience*, edited by Axel Seeman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

its illusory nature, therefore benefits social development, and combats the disabling force of banishment, disrupting its snowballing prevalence.

The situations through which Seesaw shows prompt joint engagement have already partially been discussed. Both scripted and unscripted interactions generally involve audience members participating in parallel behaviors towards commonly perceived goals, accomplished through the plurality of their actions. A notable feature of this method is its common involvement of music, such as in the Dragon's Lullaby: singing along, or even just being present within the space of a communal musical ritual fosters inclusion while retaining the individuality of audience members with tangible plot results.

Evidence also exists that the communal experience of music, a ubiquitous element of human civilization since prehistory, can be tangibly experienced by some autistic individuals. In an interview of autism advocate Amy Sequenzia conducted by Bakan, Sequenzia stated that "There is something about the social experience/connection that actually being in a place where music is being made – seeing and in essence 'feeling' the musicians before you, as well as the other audience members around you – that inspires a heightened emotional (maybe even spiritual?) experience of the music on your part"[22] when discussing her preference for live music over recorded music. Perhaps allowing neurodivergent children to experience this abstract emotion associated with Joint Engagement in the sensory friendly, secure environment of a Seesaw show (as opposed to say, a normative popular music concert), becomes a virtue on its own, and explains Bagnall's observation that audience members are generally particularly fascinated by the music team and their instruments.

[22] Bakan, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 211.

**Conclusion: What Now?**

What this exploration of Seesaw's system of theater with regards to its curbing of Kitwood's disabling forces exposes most of all is the sheer insufficiency of merely accommodating neurodivergent needs in normative entertainment. Even within a normative experience wherein sensory or physical issues are mitigated (through using earplugs, ASL translators, etc.), the benefits and fundamental functionality of entertainment as an experience may remain out of neurodivergent audiences' reach. The existence of a model as robust as Seesaw's evidences that alternatives exist, and are grossly more appropriate for autistic individuals, especially in fostering childhood development. Of course, there remains value in accommodation, especially in combatting the stigmatization and labeling processes Koen and Bakan identify – yet its implementation must be supplemented with more systemic variation.

The question therefore becomes not the inherent virtues of Seesaw's model, but rather its implementation and generalizability to other forms of entertainment beyond the theater world. Many of the unique qualities in Seesaw's approach which generate accessibility rely on the interactivity and multi-modal implementations enabled by theater. If a new system of theater relies so heavily on medial plurality, how could more restrictive mediums, such as film, music, or visual art, replicate the same success?

While this quandary may initially appear insurmountable, correct conceptualization of entertainment independently of its artistic manifestations may prove it to be an illusory hurdle. First, entertainment must be recognized as conceptually distinct from art, as it contextualizes an artistic object (say, a painting) within a sensory experience (the smells, sights, sounds, and feelings of a cold art museum wing). The human sensory complex is, in most cases, indivisible, and all sensory experiences implicate a relationship between a plurality of perceived stimuli. As

a result, even strict mediums may utilize additional sensory experiences to enhance accessibility, as art museums have been doing for decades through distributing personal audio devices facilitating guided tours or managing accessibility needs.

Second, we must note that the artistic makeup of accessible and normative entertainment cannot be congruent, as it inherently derives from systemic change. The development of a new system of entertainment requires, inevitably, that lenses to asses art for its potential towards becoming neurodivergent-focused entertainment be developed. Such efforts have fortunately already begun to be undertaken by academics such as musicologist Dave Headlam, who investigates the particularly autistic potentiality of post-Schoenbergian atonal music.[23]

Here, I turn towards any neurodivergent readers, for whom, I hope, this investigation has been inspiring and encouraging. Left unchecked, even institutions as seemingly innocuous as the entertainment industry may appear whirring, uncaring, intimidating mechanistic arbiters of social exclusion, and implicating oneself within their processes may result in a grueling sense of insufficiency. Reality, however, dictates that all social mechanisms are artificial, capable of change and, even more fortunately, of coexistence. The goodwill and social awareness of the people of Seesaw, combined with neurodivergent advocates, together, through considerable efforts, may one day create a ubiquitous system of their own – those efforts are well underway. In the meantime, we must celebrate and assert neurodiversity beyond labels, seek unwavering our individual needs, and communally nurture the gradual evolution of budding accessible systems. Entertainment, after all, is a human right – to be won, like all civil paradigms, through uncompromising insistence.

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[23] Dave Headlam, "Learning to Hear Autistically," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, edited by Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Routledge, 2006) 117.