



## **Virtual Theatre Of Neurodiversity: A Workbook for Educators, Facilitators and Performers with Disabilities**

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## Introduction

This workbook is an act of gratitude to the neurodiverse performers and performers with intellectual disabilities who I've worked with over the years. In particular, I give thanks to those who have worked with me over the last 9 months, during a global pandemic. We had to reimagine a *Theatre of Neurodiversity* that took place entirely online. We couldn't physically be together and I have yet to share a physical space with and meet many of these performers in person. Still, they put their trust in me and invested in theatre creating and building community in an entirely new way. We paddled through uncharted waters together and in each workshop/rehearsal we learned new ways of doing, being and creating. My fears and insecurities surrounding technology and the daunting challenge of reinventing my work merged with my concern for the disability community who are one of the most vulnerable populations to such a virus and its devastating complications and who are often left out of the governmental health plans. Through all of this, we came together, told our stories and created art. We all were starting from the same place; the unknown and that can be a frightening place. It takes great strength to create theatre through all of that but it also became a crucial space for us to attempt to process the world around us, our place in it and our needs, wants and desires. I wanted to make this workbook for other facilitators and educators who have searched for a space like this. I also wanted to make it for neurodiverse performers and performers with intellectual disabilities to have a collection of exercises and methods heavily informed by members of their community that they can use independently of facilitators and educators. In the last section entitled "For Neurodiverse Performers and Performers with Intellectual Disabilities" I have put the entire book into a simple summary, in accessible text for this very reason. I have worked and created with neurodiverse performers and performers with intellectual disabilities for 12 years. It is because of this that I am not surprised by their resiliency in times of hardship or their abilities to respond to it in creative ways. I equally appreciate how difficult this time has been for them and all those providing carework around them. Every time they accept my invitation and hold creative virtual space with me, I am filled with unwavering gratitude and appreciation for their artistry and practice. This book belongs to them.

## Beyond the Ballet

When we think about conventional theatre history we may think about Shakespeare and we think about the Ancient Greeks and their amphitheatres, which now sit as relics for tourists to stand on their crumbling stages and shout to admire the wondrous acoustics. I did this myself on a tour of Greece when I scampered away from my tour group to stand on an ancient stage, take a huge breath and say "wow, I'm here, in the place where theatre was invented." I did the same at the Globe Theatre in London. "This is where the greatest stories ever told were told for the first time. Where all of Shakespeare's plays, the basis of all stories as we know them came to be." I've chased theatre history across the globe. Theatre has been the love of my life since I could remember. It has been a part of my core since the beginning. I'll never forget the story my mother loves to tell about the moment she believes she witnessed me discover that love. I was 3 years old and she took me to *The Nutcracker Ballet*. The audience was filled with kids squirming, getting up and down from their seats, whining and chatting but

I, as the story goes, sat completely still, transfixed by the happenings onstage. It's a long show and there is no dialogue, the entire story told through dance. My mom always ends this story with "I knew right then; you were going to be in the theatre." It is such a romantic, idealistic tale of prophecy and serendipity. I think about that 3-year-old all the time, wide-eyed and still, defying all odds of toddlerdom. She came with me to college in New York City where I studied musical theatre, to auditions for cruise ships, national tours and Broadway and then she started to squirm and lose focus. I wanted the theatre to mean more to me, to mean more to all of us.

When I started to think back to being on the great amphitheatres in Greece and The Globe in London I started to realize I was standing on stages where I would have never been allowed to stand as an actor when they were first in use, questioning things further, I ask how hard it is to believe that one white, British man was the inventor of storytelling, when humans have been telling stories prior to even language itself. I started to unravel the idea that theatre has been stolen and under utilized and there is an entire history of theatre that exists prior to the history we've been taught. Theatre historian Eli Rozik examines "I contend that theatre is a specific imagistic medium (i.e., a method of representation or, rather, an instrument of thinking and communication) and as such its roots lie in the spontaneous image-making faculty of the human psyche. This innate ability is assumed to exist prior to the advent of natural language."<sup>1</sup> As soon as my mindset changed so did the work I began to book.

I started performing in shows that toured underserved high schools in Brooklyn and Staten Island that looked at the consequences of drunk driving. The stakes were high, this was a whole other world of theatre. I remember performing at a school the day after a funeral of a student who had died in a drunk driving accident. These high school students had never actually seen a play before even though they lived brief train rides away from Broadway. They weren't welcome in those theatre spaces. Because of this, they didn't learn about theatre "etiquette" and would often shout things at us as we were performing. In fact, as part of our rehearsal process our Director prepped us for this by shouting while we performed. We passed through metal detectors, taking off shoes and belts just to get inside the schools. There were bars on the windows. I remember thinking; if you're treated like a criminal in the place where you're supposed to be educated and cared for it must be a million times harder to have the drive to succeed. Yet, through how heavy I felt, I could see that shouting at us was their way of listening and communicating. They were in a great deal of pain and in the brief moments where we got to have one on one conversations with them before we were corralled away to the next location, they were grateful. I started to become transfixed by the theatre again. I took a drama therapy course and while taking that course the news broke that 15-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered walking home from buying candy at a convenience store. We worked through this grave injustice and sickening travesty through theatre, through roleplaying, unraveling and rehearsing plans of action going forward. I took the hand of my 3-year-old self and said "I can't wait for what theatre has in store for us!

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<sup>1</sup> Rozik, E. (2008). *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking ritual and other theories of origin*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press

## Decolonial Theatre

Theatre consumed by the masses needs to mirror the world around us including all people but I also want to emphasize that we need to have a unique understanding and appreciation for Disability Theatre as its own entity with its own aesthetics and processes. Disability Theatre shouldn't have to be forced into a box with other westernized theatre ideals. Westernized theatre has a long history of excluding, stealing and appropriating the stories of people with disabilities. With that kind of history built into its structure there is not enough room in those confines for artists with disabilities and their authentic narratives to flourish. This puts not only the artists at a disservice but it also stifles and does a disservice to the potential of theatre as a whole.

People with disabilities have had a long yet under-documented history of using theatre and storytelling as a tool for activism, particularly within disability rights movements. Disability Theatre has always existed as its own entity and as a tool and we need to honour that history as both a part of theatre history as a whole and as its own category of Disability Theatre history. Mark Friedman and Ruthie-Marie Beckwith look at how songwriting, storytelling and performance were crucial tools in Disability Justice movements, not only to get their messages across but also to provide access points for people with intellectual disabilities to participate in these movements to begin with.

Songs about resistance and getting out of institutions inspired the membership to continue their liberation efforts. The incorporation of storytelling and song into the self-advocacy movement served functions similar to other civil rights struggles against oppressive institutional structures. These functions helped members overcome fear, enhanced members' sense of identity, built solidarity at local and statewide meetings, and provided structure for the oral history members relied on as a way to overcome illiteracy.<sup>2</sup>

Worshipping the written and spoken word as the most prominent feature in theatre is a colonial imposition. Theatre is a language in and of itself and a way of accessing communication from a different place. *Theatre of Neurodiversity* is one that doesn't solely rely on text and words but that opens itself up to communicating and experiencing communication in numerous ways.

My work is an ongoing acknowledgement not just of the Indigenous land we perform on but of the original storytellers of this land and who I believe truly originated theatre. My work is not a reinvention of theatre so much as it is a rejection that theatre took its only original, "classical" shape and form in Ancient Greece or Elizabethan London, that long before that, right here on Turtle Island, great theatre was being made, theatre that was just as much a part of everyday survival, communication and connection as it was about

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<sup>2</sup> Friedman, M., & Beckwith, R.-M. (2014). "Self-advocacy: The Emancipation Movement Led by People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities." In L. Ben-Moshe, C. Chapman, & A. C. Carey (Eds.), *Disability incarcerated: Imprisonment and disability in the United States and Canada* (pp. 237–254). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

entertainment. Cree performer, theatre scholar and author Geraldine Manossa describes how theatre existed prior to colonial contact and was an integral part of Cree culture and knowledge sharing. She talks about how theatre was an active exchange between listener and storyteller, an equal contribution by both parties in order for it to fulfill its purpose.

Manossa goes on to illustrate how theatre has always been a shared community practice that reflects one's embodied knowledge, ancestral teachings and connection to the land. Through this understanding of theatre, we can see how interwoven it has been into daily life. Manossa talks about witnessing this embodied knowledge through the storytelling of spiritual advisor Eddie Bellrose

A main distinction between contemporary Native performance and colonial Western theatre is that the roots of Native performance can be traced to the lands of this country. When a Cree storyteller, like Eddie, tells a story his sounds, words and movements are inspired by the land that he has experienced. When he imitates the sounds of waves, unfolding upon a shore, it is a body of water that he has visited and experienced. It is a shore where his grandfather or great-grandfather fished from and prayed to, offering thanks...Native performance theatre comes from a specific source and entails a particular language, which unfolds movements true to story.<sup>3</sup>

It is this blend of art and life that is a key component in what Indigenous theatre offers its audiences and is a crucial part in redefining theatre and theatre education. Indigenous art and performance often involved the entire community. It was a vital practice, a part of survival, expression, connection, and action that moved the community toward prosperous vitality. Tlingit curator and writer Candace Hopkins states "Aboriginal people have been doing community-based art since the beginning of time...for Native people, art has always been a community activity. I would like to put forth that perhaps the reason why there have been no words in our languages for art is because art was never viewed as something separate or distinct from life itself."<sup>4</sup>

Improv and its exercises today can be traced to American theatre academic, educator and acting coach Viola Spolin. As a Russian Jewish immigrant herself, she started developing a series of games and exercises for working with young children and recent immigrants in low-income neighborhoods. After studying under Neva Boyd she wanted to develop a new form of theatre training inspired by the benefits of play that could surpass the barriers of language. It is crucial to note, that while improvisation has been appropriated, most often by white men, and has become an elite and exclusive form of theatre in many circles, it was founded for the sole purpose of building a community and

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<sup>3</sup> Manossa, G (2001) "The Beginning of Cree Performance Culture" In *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre*. Playwrights Canada Press. Toronto, ON

<sup>4</sup> Hopkins, C (2003) "How to Get Indians into an Art Gallery" in *Making a Noise*. Banff Centre Press. Banff, AL

a form of communication that is accessible to those who are marginalized, therefore I argue that Improv at its core is neurodiverse.

Cree artist and educator Carol Greyeyes speaks about her background in post-secondary theatre education that consisted of a canon of plays by white British and American men, with the emphasis on the actor's job being "interpreters of text and to follow orders given by the director."<sup>5</sup> It wasn't until she started creating theatre with youth at the *Native Survival School* that she started to learn the impact collective theatre making and telling one's own stories can have on the artists creating and audiences witnessing she explains,

First, I realized that our own stories and perspectives were interesting and valuable, and that hearing our own voices through this style of storytelling connected people at a deep level. In addition, I discovered the effectiveness of a collective play-making process, which was the methodology used to create the theatrical piece. The use of a circle in that process and the experience of being included as an equal in a circle were quite revolutionary ideas to me.<sup>5</sup>

Decolonizing theatre in this way, and rooting it back in its community practice of sharing and exchanging sets the foundation for a theatre of possibilities and a theatre of discourse, where audiences are not just performed at, but performed with. It gives it back its power as a vehicle of change and accessible tool of agency.

I often describe theatre as a mirror to see ourselves, and others and validate our experiences, stories, knowledge and teachings. The need to tell our stories and to receive the gift of another's story in a community exchange is an innately human practice. Theatre is embedded in what it means to be human and experience that humanity. In Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* he draws upon the ancient Chinese fable of Xua-Xua, the "pre-woman" who is said to have discovered theatre. Xua-Xua is considered pre-human because she existed before human concepts such as language. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. As her son transitioned from being a part of her body into his own individual who would partake in activities separate from her, she had to come to terms with the fact that her son was both a part of her and also entirely separate. This realization and level of a mother's wisdom is what is said to be the moment theatre was unearthed. As Boal explains;

Xua-Xua looked for answers by looking at herself. At this moment, theatre was discovered. The moment when Xua-Xua gave up trying to recover her baby and keep him all for herself, accepted that he was somebody else, and looked at herself, emptied of a part of herself...In discovering theatre, the being became human. This is theatre – the art of looking at ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Greyeyes, C. (2019). "Making Our Own Bundle: Philosophical Reflections On Indigenous Theatre Education" In Archibald-Barber, J.R , Irwin, K. & Day, M.J (EDS.), *Performing Turtle Island: Indigenous Theatre on the World Stage* (pp. 51 – 71) Saskatchewan, ON: U of R Press

<sup>6</sup> Boal, A. (1992) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. London and New York: Routledge

Theatre and storytelling is the language of all humans. It has existed prior to any other language. Therefore, theatre education needs to have this foundational understanding. As Cree theatre creator and writer Floyd Favel Starr puts it “I guess that is what theatre training is all about. To get to the language of the heart and spirit as that is all that is now open to us, and whatever words, sounds, music and movement we have come up with is our language, the language of theatre, which is the language of the trees and the birds.”<sup>7</sup>

In this moment, during the global pandemic of COVID-19 with stages, theatre spaces and theatre schools being closed we have been forced to reimagine and expand our definitions of theatre because storytelling and sharing is still necessary to our human experience. Theatre artists responded almost immediately with free virtual creation projects, and socially distant theatre experiments on balconies and in open spaces. We made art responding to police violence and the most recent global Black Live Matters movements in response to the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. We offered free workshops and moments of collective creation that would connect us virtually during isolation. Theatre found its roots in survival and activism again. We sharpened the tool of theatre and got to work when we heard the call of loneliness and saw the face of injustice. And it is with this in mind that I was able to reimagine theatre in the virtual world during the global pandemic of COVID-19. It was not easy, far from it, but it is entirely possible when you expand your understanding of what theatre is and what it has to offer us in times of need, times just like these ones.

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<sup>7</sup> Starr, Floyd Favel (1993) “The theatre of orphans/Native languages on stage.” In *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre*. Playwrights Canada Press. Toronto, ON

## Collective Processing

Building a theatre piece together is building community together. COVID-19 prevented many people from being in and with their communities. During the isolation of the pandemic many of the performers I work with, performers who are neurodiverse and performers with intellectual disabilities, who are used to being in day programs with other folks with similar lived experiences became isolated. In response, I focused on community building to address this isolation and connect us from a distance. These physically distancing conditions motivate me to think about how we are used to finding a sense of community in the places we meet and in being near each other and having physical contact. But with or without the barrier of a pandemic this may not be accessible to everyone. This brought me to this question: How can we make community building an activity with multiple points of access, that does not necessarily have to take place in one physical location or have any physical touch? I think you will see throughout the exercises in this book, building community in this new way is a through-line, because it was at the forefront of my mind when rediscovering *Theatre of Neurodiversity* (TFN) in the virtual sphere.

To get a sense of our *Theatre of Neurodiversity*, it's important to understand that it lives in the realm of devised theatre. Devised theatre allows participants to collectively venture into the unknown and through a variety of improv experiments discover a piece of theatre unique to their collective. The process is open to change and adaptation, to an expansive and fluid definition of theatre considerate of the needs and talents of the performers. In this process I see ourselves as detectives, excavators, and anthropologists and that is why the connection to Disability Theatre history is important. But, I also see us as explorers, inventors, creators and problem solvers. We are addressing our own needs and desires, those of our co-creators and of the community at large.

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* is theatre that takes place within a community and sets out to deal with an issue faced in that community, address it through theatre and performance and roleplay possible solutions. He uses theatre as a tool and explains, "the theatre itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution."<sup>8</sup> In creating theatre together, we are collectively processing our own narratives, those of our co-creators and current events around us. There has been a lot to process this year and I'm glad we have each other to process it with. Neurodiverse people and people with intellectual disabilities aren't often given as much time, space and opportunity to process these narratives as neurotypical people do. Neurotypical people often shy away from speaking to neurodiverse people about personal and global issues because they assume they are too fragile or lack the intellectual capacity. We don't make that assumption in our rehearsal room. We have our knowledge of Disability Theatre history that proves this assumption isn't founded on facts.

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<sup>8</sup> Boal A (1982) 'Speech delivered by Augusto Boal in Kolkata' Jana Sanskriti Online 2011  
[www.janasanskriti.org/speechdeliveredbyaugustoboainkolkata.doc](http://www.janasanskriti.org/speechdeliveredbyaugustoboainkolkata.doc)

Since I brought *Theatre of Neurodiversity* to an online platform we have had a performer who communicates fairly exclusively through echolalia and music (being able to learn, play and mash up almost any song on the piano and sing in perfect pitch) write a solo musical about a rabbit who only communicates through song, trying to find his place in a world of non-singers. Performers also created a poem proclaiming who they are, reclaiming terms like creative, smart and sexy; words that aren't used to describe them often enough. Most recently, performers wanted to talk about and process the most recent wave of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. They brought this idea forth to me because they knew this was the place in which we could all process it together. They created a story that represented the Black Lives Matter Movement through a village where a king fears its superheroes and builds a wall to keep them out, until an uprising of support for the superheroes inspires the community to come together and start to take down the wall. This is the work of collectively processing our common experiences, our differences, and the world we witness and are an active part of. We are rehearsing for revolutions big and small every time we are together.

Building this space for and with those who have been left out of these spaces and conversations is crucial. A space that reclaims the margins to which neurodiverse people and people with intellectual disabilities have been pushed and uses them as points of access is an important space. As scholar and educator bell hooks states about the power of existing in the margin;

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility... We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Performance scholar Honor Ford-Smith makes a similar argument when looking at performances by non-dominant groups. She states “My argument is simple: embodied performances of humans existing at the margins are powerful and productive because they can challenge dominant colonial representations of experience and teach us to decolonize identity and community in profound ways”<sup>10</sup> *Theatre of Neurodiversity* is an integral part of the movement of looking at theatre as the point of access it was always designed to be. The non-dominant experience is crucial to sustaining a theatre of social justice and self advocacy.

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<sup>9</sup> hooks, b (1990) “Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness” in *Yearning*. (pp. 145 – 153) Between the Lines Press

<sup>10</sup> Ford-Smith, H (2019). “The Body and Performance in 1970s Jamaica: Toward a Decolonial Cultural Method.” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 23, no. 1(58), (pp. 150-168.)

## Self-Advocacy

Devised theatre practice calls on participants to build and create the scripts and staging, to speak their ideas and opinions. I have found this to be a transferable skill to their lives. Here I explain what I have learned about devised theatre practice and opinion forming skills. In the rehearsal room, virtual or otherwise, we are rehearsing and in turn creating a better, radically accessible space for all of us. We are also rehearsing how to advocate for that space outside the rehearsal room. We are practicing opinion forming. I have watched performers who've worked with me over the years, who start off unable to contribute and make decisions on the stories they wish to tell and how they wish to tell them begin to take their space and bring in ideas of their own. Self advocacy is deeply rooted in opinion-forming. If we do not know what we need, want and like how can we advocate for it? Neurotypical individuals are asked for their opinions and contributions all time. From a young age, we are able to develop a strong opinion forming muscle. The rehearsal room and process of devised theatre is an opportunity for neurodiverse performers and performers with intellectual disabilities to build this muscle and in this space ideas and opinions are validated and echoed back to the performer through fellow performers taking them on and performing them for each other and then validated even further when taken to a wider audience. A performer learning their wants and needs is forming their personal aesthetic and providing an addition to the aesthetic of the collective. Once again, it has a transformative ripple effect that begins with the individual, contributes to the group and is witnessed and received by the audience. Matt Hargrave has worked with neurodiverse performers and performers with disabilities throughout the UK for many years and has written extensively on the aesthetics and particulars surrounding disability theatre arts. Hargrave looks at how disability theatre is an act of social justice.

“The disabled actor, as a representative of human diversity, is an asset to the stage. His [their] actions may transform not just the representation of his [their] own disability but the theatrical form that he embodies or works within... The way he[they] looks, moves, interacts, behaves, delivers dialogue, dances, responds, enters and leaves the stage is complex embodiment. By acting, literally representing himself [themselves] and others, the actor may influence social change. Whether he [they] passes for able-bodied or whether he [they] ‘chooses’ to play ‘himself’ [themselves], he [they] becomes ‘a skillful interpreter of the world.’”<sup>11</sup>

I want to acknowledge that virtual theatre (theatre rehearsed and performed online) comes with its own challenges and barriers to access given the requirements one needs to have full access. Participants require devices to take the workshops on, a strong internet connection, and an ability to operate these devices and systems. They also need to be able to commit to participation in spite of any other distractions in their households as they are navigating both the realms of the physical space they are in and the virtual one. However, with the groups I've been working with, I have actually seen

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<sup>11</sup> Hargrave, M. (2015) *Theatres of Learning Disability*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

participants' attain more of their access needs and reach success and milestones in online programs, which was not possible in the physical performance space. One performer I worked with in person prior to the lockdown was shy and quiet either masking her anxiety with giggles or leaning into it with tears. She didn't like when all eyes were on her and kept her participation to a minimum. The moment we transitioned online, she shined, participating fully from the comfort of her living room. I saw a smile on her face so different than any reaction I'd seen before, I barely recognized her. When she offered her name and an action (a ritual we do at the beginning of every rehearsal) it was often a big hair flip accompanied with a spin, an action that can be interpreted as sassy, strong and powerful. She was advocating for herself and taking her space.

Taking our devised theatre practice to the virtual studio has given us a chance to expand upon the possibilities of *Theatre of Neurodiversity* and allow space for independent thought and creative contribution. We can all see each other on one screen and respond to one another authentically. For many, there is safety and ability to explore from a home base that is familiar and meets their physical needs.

## Ritual: Opening and Closing Rehearsal

Ritual has long played an important role in the theatre. Ritual also has a long history in disability and autistic communities for very similar reasons. Rituals ground us in time and place and differentiate the sacred space of our storytelling and theatre creating from the rest of our world. Rituals are calming because they are consistent. They act as a touch point of safety. Wherever our creativity leads us we can always come back to our rituals. Autistic folks use rituals in their daily lives in the form of echolalia, stims and in having consistent routines.

### The Circle

When rehearsals take place in person I always build a circle out of chairs in the center of the room for us to meet. This is part of our ritual and a formation we can come back to throughout our rehearsal and creation process when we need grounding and time to think and process. It also affirms that power can be shared instead of hoarded. Cree artist and educator Carol Greyeyes talks a lot about the importance of the circle in her theatre work with youth. She explains, “Knowledge is a circle and it is democratic; all heads are the same height and whatever position you have in the circle is unique and has a valuable perspective. Not only do we contribute from our perspective in the circle, but we expand our collective knowledge in the process of watching others learn.”<sup>5</sup> This reminds me of what Paulo Freire refers to as banking education, where education is thought of as the student as an empty vessel to be filled, he explains,

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits<sup>12</sup>

People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to experiencing banking education as they are often underestimated in their ability to be critical thinkers with valuable input and so through TFN we work to flip that paradigm via both the literal circle and its symbolic significance. How do we create a circle online (or your chosen virtual meeting platform – as I assume by the time you are reading this many more options will be available to you)? I allow the concept of settling into the circle to still remain. I start every rehearsal 5 minutes after its set time, I allow us all to see each other, take each other in and talk about whatever we want. I don’t lead any activity or conversation. I just let the circle form itself and this is a part of our grounding ritual.

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<sup>12</sup> Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic

## The Name Game

Once our 5 minutes of circle forming comes to a close, we do an exercise I refer to as the *Name Game* inspired by similar exercises by Augusto Boal.<sup>6</sup> This is an exercise I treasure and have dissected its significance in my work many times. When inside a physical studio this is done within our circle. We go around the circle and each person says their name and does an action. Any action that is completely unique to them. We then repeat their name and action back to them. On the zoom online platform, I facilitate the order of performers by spotlighting them as the only person on all our screens, using speaker view. This way they know we are watching and listening to them when they are doing their name actions. When doing this exercise for the first time with a new participant or new group it can sometimes be daunting for both the facilitator and participants. If you get to someone who is unsure of what to do, be sure to wait for them, give them time to process their moment in the spotlight. This exercise takes as long as it takes. This is the very first moment of devised theatre and when finished every participant has devised something. I often incorporate this exercise into our final performance instead of a bow. The participant creates a moment connected to their name and we echo it back to them live. It is theirs and we all witness it and validate it. Through this exercise we are conveying the idea to each other that what you create is sacred and valuable here, both unique on its own and a part of our collective whole.

## Czechoslovakia

Even though this is a physical warm-up I always make sure to mention that standing is optional (to consider those who are wheelchair users or have physical limitations or just don't feel comfortable standing). Being on zoom, really allows participants to be comfortable to make the choice that works best for them. This exercise is very repetitive which makes it easy to learn and remember. It is a combination of both spoken word and physical action. When bringing forth exercises to a rehearsal room with performers with disabilities it is important to make every effort to meet a number of access points. Performers who communicate and express themselves verbally can access this exercise through the spoken words, while those who communicate non-verbally may prefer to focus more on the physicality. The spoken words are "Czechoslovakia boom sha boom, Yugoslavia boom sha boom let's get the rhythm of the hands" and we clap twice "we got the rhythm of the hands" and we clap twice again. Then we repeat this all over again this time adding the feet and then again adding the head, then hips and the whole body. The whole-body movement we call the "hatcha" (i.e. "let's get the rhythm of the hatcha"). Over the years of doing this exercise at the beginning of every rehearsal (following the name game) a few interesting things have happened. Participants, many of whom would be considered the "quieter" members of the group, start adding their own sounds to the movements and as an act of gratitude and validation I have added them to the exercise. Now when we do the head movement we say "ding dong," thanks to a performer who added it in. The first time I acknowledged his addition and added it to the exercise, the group was joyous, laughing and celebrating. The participant who created it was beaming. Every time I work with that particular group, they never forget his addition and he glows every time we get to it. For the hips we do a "boom, boom, boom" sound that was contributed by another participant from a different rehearsal

group. Again, the participant who added it feels great pride hearing his contribution out loud. These opening exercises serve several purposes. Some are as simple as warming us up for the rehearsal and creative process ahead and some more complex like promoting and validating small moments of devising/creation and setting the groundwork and touch points for a safe rehearsal space.

## **Closing**

As rituals act as a container for rehearsal it's important that the closing looks similar to the opening. Depending on how long our actual rehearsal goes we will sometimes play a theatre game as part of our closing (see below for more theatre games) but no matter what I always leave time for the name game. I invite participants to do the same thing they did at the beginning of rehearsal or try out a new action, whatever feels best for them.

## Some Other Devised Theatre Exercises for a Zoom Rehearsal

### Come, Come My friends

This exercise is adapted, for virtual rehearsal, from the work of Augusto Boal.<sup>6</sup> This exercise has a repetitive refrain, similar to the process of Czechoslovakia. One at a time, one participant says “come, come my friends who...” and fills in the phrase with something that applies to them. It can be something they have or want or like or hate, anything that applies to them. Once the participant has said their phrase, I ask who else does this apply to and have them raise their hands. Everyone who connects to the phrase then has to make an image of it. For example; “come, come my friends who like pizza” would be followed by anyone who likes pizza doing an image of someone who likes pizza. I then ask participants to hold the image while we look at the other images around us, taking in their similarities and differences. The exercise accomplishes several things. It invites participants to bond over common interests, which could lead to themes for the work they create together. It encourages us to spot patterns that come up in the language of imagery which can also be used in creating work together. This activity also builds community, comradery, and common ground. I have found this exercise so useful in the time of Zoom, as an exercise that really connects us despite our physical distance.

### What Are You Doing?

“What are you doing?” promotes skills of improvisation and creative thinking. One participant does an action, and another asks them “what are you doing?” When the participant tells the asker what they are doing they then take on that action as their own, as an act of affirming and validating the action. After a moment they then create their own action, and another participant asks them what they are doing and the cycle continues until all participants have all finished.

### Brain Gym

The following exercises get participants moving and thinking and they also promote joy, fun and play. These are in no way trivial attributes; in fact they are foundational to this work. It’s crucial to understand that we approach theatre from a place of joy and play. This is important now, more than ever as I witness the disability community I work with during the pandemic have experienced extreme shifts in their routines, where their daily lives and rituals are uprooted. This is compounded by them and their friends being at high risk for serious complications from COVID-19, resulting in high anxiety therefore under these conditions, any moments of joy are essential. Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal viewed theatre as an act of justice with healing properties both on a personal and community level, and highlight joy as a vital part of these acts.

I find these exercises are best taught in this order building upon one another. It might be best to teach the first exercise in one rehearsal and then build on the next one the following week. They are specifically designed for an online platform like Zoom.

### Exercise 1:

Participants are given a number of commands with accompanying actions:

- i. In—bring your fists together in front of your chest, elbows out to the sides
- ii. Out—open your hands (jazz hands) and put arms out no bent elbows
- iii. Up—point index fingers, hands next to your face pointing up
- iv. Down—point index fingers, hands in front of your chest pointing down
- v. Dab—Dab to one of the top corners of your screen

### Exercise 2

- i. Ship—stay in frame as centered as possible
- iii. Swab the Deck—pretend to clean the camera lens
- iv. Walk the Plank—take three steps toward the camera then fall out of the frame
- v. Mermaid—do your very best mermaid singing
- vi. Man Overboard—fall off the ship to the one side
- vii. I Spy—move your eye as close to the camera as you can
- viii. Captain's Coming—everyone snaps to attention and salutes.

### **One Word Story**

This is a common improv exercise that can be particularly useful in either finding a theme for your theatre creation or building on a theme and prompting a creation. In our rehearsals, one-word contributions are suggested but it's never a hard and fast rule. There is an understanding that for a lot of individuals with intellectual disabilities creative thinking and public speaking in this way can often be a new experience. If an idea comes up and they are ready to add a sentence or two I never cut them off. This is a general rule for our rehearsals; when someone wants to share something, we all stop and listen. These can be pivotal moments that can easily be missed otherwise. Every participant adds a word (or sentence) one at a time, creating a story. I also encourage movement in addition to or instead of a word or sentence.

## Choosing a Theme/Starting point

While some of our performances don't have a theme and consist of a series of vignettes that are unrelated it is often useful to pick a theme, topic and/or some general points of interest to focus our performance around prior to delving into the theatre creation process. I'll be honest, this part is never easy and never goes the same way twice. Regardless, it's important to leave time and space for participants to share their thoughts on the story they wish to explore. There are performers I've worked with for years and at that point this becomes easier but when working with a first-time group this can be particularly tough. Most neurodiverse folks and folks with intellectual disabilities don't get asked their creative opinion often enough to work on the skill of forming one. Here are a couple approaches to finding a theme:

- Examples - It's important to keep decolonial theatre in mind and expand upon the traditional canon, understanding that Disability Theatre deserves its own space. We have the unique opportunity to reclaim and reimagine theatre. I often bring in traditional Indigenous stories from around the world. Many of which feature animals as prominent characters. We read them together and voice the different characters and talk about the structure of a story and the lessons embedded within. One story I introduce to our canon often is a creation story similar to the Haudenosaunee creation story, that Thomas King titles "Woman Who Fell from the Sky."<sup>13</sup> We prominently feature this story for the same reason Thomas King shares this story; to flip the paradigm on the colonial ways of looking at the world and its teachings. This creation story is different than the dominant narrative of a single *being* creating the earth and its set of rules. In the creation story King shares, the world is created collectively through a series of trials, errors and teamwork.<sup>13</sup> This is a reflection of the *Theatre of Neurodiversity* and practice of collective creation we cultivate. We have also looked at the traditional African stories of Anansi the spider. Then we set out to make our own. I ask the participants what kind of lessons we'd like to teach our audience and what is going on in our world that we would like to highlight. In one rehearsal one of the participants brought up the Black Lives Matter movement and I asked him to explain to the group what Black Lives Matter meant to him. The story he created ended up being about a King who was afraid of the superheroes in his community and wanting them to be stopped. He builds a wall around his castle to keep the superheroes out but as an uproar sweeps across the community, as everyone stands behind the superheroes shouting "Super powers are beautiful!" and begin dismantling the wall, he eventually joins them in the long journey of taking down the wall piece by piece. I also use poetry a lot as examples (often poems by Maya Angelou, as I find her work accessible with a lot of literal language). Poetry often has patterns and themes that can inspire our own poems and songs. We used the poem "I Am Canadian" by Duke Redbird in which every line starts with the words "I am." This example format allowed us to write a poem where we could each contribute a line describing what/who we are. The

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<sup>13</sup> King, T.(2011) Truth About Stories : A Native Narrative. House of Anansi Press

examples I choose are always intentional and I would encourage others to do the same. The act of reclaiming our narratives is always one of social justice and empowerment. Disability Theatre has a long history of being created as a form of activism and we want to honor that.

- Brainstorming - Sometimes I don't use examples. Sometimes we brainstorm, popcorn style. I pull up a blank document and ask for ideas, words, colors, feelings, current and upcoming events and we just write them all down and then comb through them looking for a common thread or a couple themes that we can create work around
- Music - Many performers I've worked with over the years have favorite songs and artists, some from musicals and movies. I encourage participants to bring their songs in, we listen to them with the lyrics on the screen and sing along if we choose to. We then look at common themes and patterns to make our own work, songs or otherwise. .

## **Movement and Sign Language**

In Disability Arts/Theatre of Neurodiversity there are performers who communicate verbally and those who communicate non-verbally and a spectrum of individuals in between. Similarly, there are those who rely on the written word and those who receive their information orally or in other formats. As I've mentioned earlier, this is why it is important to consider as many access points as possible in all aspects of rehearsal and creation. Creating movement pieces is a crucial part of the work we do and it's important that they are also paired with text. When we explored the "I am Canadian" poem and then subsequently created our own poems that emulated a similar format, we also created a movement piece. I had participants say their "I am..." line and create an action/piece of movement to go with it. Much like the name game we repeated their line and movement back to them for affirmation. In addition to this we strung each new line of movement together until everyone's lines were spoken and danced. We created a complete movement piece that I then set to music.

We use basic sign language quite a bit in our rehearsal room. We often attach signs to poems or songs we are working on, as an access point.

## What are the shows like?

I get this question a lot. Everyone is curious about how making theatre with people with intellectual disabilities and neurodiversity is possible and the curiosity is heightened even more when it must happen virtually. It takes an understanding that we are not trying to impose a westernized, restricted, colonial commonplace version of theatre upon folks who have never been welcomed into that format. That is not useful for them nor does it contribute to the creative expansion and contribution to the world of theatre at large. What is most exciting and crucial about this work is that it is constantly discovering itself and evolving. *Theatre of Neurodiversity* sets itself apart and our shows always look different than the ones that come before and the ones that proceed them. Our focus is on the creation process and the audience is often granted the unique fortune of having an inside look at that process. This work belongs to the disability community. And while myself and anyone delving into this work from outside or within that community works as conduits to support it, it does not live within the constraints of westernized theatre. It has more impact upon performers, audience, and the theatre canon to which we are infiltrating to let it flow beyond these imposed confines and in turn expand the possibilities of theatre at large.

## Technology: Why We Never Mute

I wish that my relationship with technology was even, in the smallest way, similar to my relationship with theatre. Technology and I have always seemed to be in opposition but I realize now my inability to accept technology as an integral part of our daily lives was a direct disservice to the performers with disabilities I work with. Many people with disabilities rely heavily on technology to meet access needs and bridge gaps in communication. It is because of disabilities movements advocating for adapting the workplace to suit access needs that many companies knew how to transition employees to remote working in the pandemic.

I am not going to impart technical wisdom here as it will never be my area of expertise but I did want to reassure others like me; it is possible to learn the basics and learn them quickly while you continue to expand upon the knowledge as you go.

As I write this, the most commonly used platform for virtual theatre is Zoom, which will require a monthly subscription of around \$20 CAD. I have also used and prefer Streamyard which is actually designed for live performances, broadcasts and podcasts. It allows the user to create an overlay screen, have titles pop up on the screen, add video footage and a slew of other options. One fun little touch is while participants are waiting to be let in the virtual studio it tells them that they are “backstage.”

By now, 9 months into the pandemic, most of us are very familiar with Zoom; using it not just for work meetings but also for conferences, performances, birthday parties and get togethers. The term “Zoom fatigue” has begun circulating as we started to feel the effects of pouring an extra amount of energy into being self aware and present, only to receive a 2 dimensional response from the screen. We have to find and create our own energy when we can’t feel the vibrations of sharing a physical space. The theatre exercises included in this book are useful for that.

With this new found familiarity of Zoom we also witness a “Zoom etiquette” begin to form. Conversations require more listening and waiting for the right opportunity to jump in, as Zoom sounds become distorted if everyone tries to speak at once because Zoom attempts to amplify the voice that it intuitively understands as being the most “prominent”. When we join a Zoom meeting people enter on mute, sometimes with their cameras off and are often reminded to “please stay on mute until you are asked to speak”. Students going to school remotely are silenced in this way as well. This etiquette is so ingrained in the structure of Zoom that there is a “raise your hand” button to let the host know you’d like to speak. While I am not here to question the validity of such a system, I will say it doesn’t work for virtual *Theatre of Neurodiversity*. We will not be telling each other to “be quiet” because it is that silencing of the thoughts, experiences and voices of neurodiverse people and people with intellectual disabilities that has brought us here and that is what we are learning to unravel and conquer together. This may make things disorienting at times and to an outsider looking in it may look disorderly. It often takes a lot of repeating and clarifying but everyone is eventually heard. No opportunity to share is lost, let go of, forgotten and silenced. And that is the heart of *Theatre of Neurodiversity*; a theatre that operates outside of orderly

and regulated space, much like Thomas King's version of the creation story. Instead of one omnipotent being creating the world perfectly, a bunch of beings who don't have all the answers collectively come together and through a series of trials, mishaps and improvisations they make their world.<sup>13</sup>

## **Accessible Summary: For Neurodiverse Performers and Performers with Intellectual Disabilities**

### **Introduction**

This book is my way of saying thank you to all the neurodiverse performers and performers with intellectual disabilities I have worked with and who have created theatre with me over the years. I want to say a special thank you to those performers who have worked with me over the past 9 months during the global pandemic of COVID-19. Together, we had to remake our theatre rehearsals and performances so they could happen online instead of in person. I was pretty afraid to do this and I didn't want to disappoint you. Thank you for putting your trust in me and believing that we could do this together. We learned many new ways of creating theatre online because of that trust.

I have also been worried about your health and safety during this time as I know it has been hard for many people with disabilities. I know it has taken a lot of strength for you to continue to make theatre with me in this new way, and during this tough time but it has also been a good place for us to express our feelings about what's been happening in the world and discuss what we need and want from it.

You have been as courageous and creative as I knew you would be. I am very thankful that you accepted the invitation to continue making theatre virtually and I appreciate you as artists and all the work you have put in. This book belongs to you.

### **Beyond the Ballet**

Many people believe that theatre was invented in Ancient Greece and that William Shakespeare is one of the first and best storytellers of all time. I did too, once, and that's why I traveled to Greece and to London to see (what I thought) were the world's first stages and performance spaces.

I have loved the theatre since I could remember. I'll never forget the story my mother loves to tell about when she thinks she saw me fall in love with theatre. I was 3 years old and she took me to "The Nutcracker Ballet." My mom said there were lots of other kids around me, moving around and making lots of noise but I sat very still and was very quiet. I was so focused on what was happening on stage. It's a long show and there is no speaking, the whole story is told through dance. My mom always ends this story by saying "I knew right then; you were going to be in the theatre." I think about that 3-year-old me all the time. I thought about 3-year-old me when I went to college in New York City where I studied musical theatre, and when I went on auditions for cruise ships, tours and Broadway. But then I started to feel like something was missing. I started to think about everything I learned about theatre and theatre history over the years and I started to question it. So, I started doing a different kind of theatre. I started performing for high school students who didn't always feel welcome at public theatre spaces, so we brought the show to them instead. I started to fall in love with a different kind of theatre. I decided to take a drama therapy class and while taking that class the news came

out that 15-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered walking home from buying candy at a convenience store. In that class we used theatre exercises to help us express our feelings and thoughts about this and we also used them to help us think of ways to fight racism, discrimination and hate.

### **Decolonial Theatre**

Many people believe that Canada is only 153 years old but that isn't true. Before that, there have been Indigenous people living in Canada for thousands of years and their families are still here today. Indigenous people are the original caretakers of this land. They are also the original artists, storytellers and theatre performers. We learn a lot about making theatre from them. Through our theatre work we are always showing that we are thankful for the Indigenous land we are on and the original storytellers of this land.

In addition to this, Disability Theatre is its own kind of theatre as well. Sometimes people tell stories, make movies, TV and theatre that feature characters with disabilities but none of the actors playing the characters with disabilities actually have disabilities themselves. This is stealing stories and jobs from performers with disabilities. This is not fair to performers with disabilities and it's also not fair to the audience watching because they don't get a true experience and understanding of the disability story,

People with disabilities have had to fight for their rights and freedoms, to be treated equally and fairly. They did this through singing, storytelling and performance. They would make songs about being freed from institutions and tell stories about the discrimination they faced. Doing this helped them understand themselves, connect with other people like them and gave people with disabilities who can't read or write a way to still tell and document their experience. What is great about theatre is that you don't have to write or read or even speak; you can express yourself in other ways like through music, dance and body language. I call this type of Disability Theatre; *Theatre of Neurodiversity*. Theatre of *Neurodiversity* doesn't only use text and words but it also allows performers to try other creative ways of communicating.

I like to think of theatre as a mirror that shows us ourselves and our stories and the stories of everyone around us. We share our stories with each other so that we are heard and seen and understood. During the global pandemic of COVID-19 with stages, theatre spaces and theatre schools being closed we have been forced to remake a new kind of theatre that happens online. Theatre artists have been helping us get through these tough times by offering free online programs and socially distant theatre performances. We have made art responding to police violence and the most recent global Black Live Matters movements in response to the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. It has not been easy, but it is possible.

### **Collective Processing**

Building a theatre performance together is building community together. COVID-19 has stopped many people from being able to be together. During this pandemic many of the performers I work with, performers who are neurodiverse and performers with intellectual disabilities, who are used to being in day programs became lonely. I started to focus on theatre workshops on building community to address loneliness and connect

us from a distance. I started to think about how we are used to finding our community in the places we meet and in being near each other and hugging one another. This brought me to this question: How can we build a community that does not take place in one physical location or have any physical touch?

In *Theatre of Neurodiversity*, we use devised theatre exercises. Devised theatre is when we create a performance together as a group. We decide what type of story we want to tell and create the story together, from scratch. I see us as theatre detectives, explorers, inventors and problem solvers. We focus on our own needs and wants, and those of our community.

There has been a lot for us to think about and a lot of feelings for us to express this year and I'm glad we have each other to process it with. Neurodiverse people and people with intellectual disabilities are not always given as much time, space and opportunity to process these feelings in comparison to neurotypical people. We know that people with disabilities have been using theatre, storytelling and music to express their feelings and advocate for themselves and others for many years.

Since we brought *Theatre of Neurodiversity* online we have had a performer who communicates through repeating and music (who is an amazing piano player and singer) write a solo musical about a rabbit who only communicates through song, trying to find his place in a world of non-singers. Performers also created a poem proclaiming who they are. Most recently, performers wanted to talk about and process the Black Lives Matter movement after the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. They brought this idea to me because they knew this was the place for us to all process it together. They created a story that represented the Black Lives Matter Movement through a village where a king fears its superheroes and builds a wall to keep them out, until the community shows their support for the superheroes and they come together and start to take down the wall.

## **Self-Advocacy**

We are always working together to create a better, more accessible space for all of us. In our theatre workshops we are rehearsing how to advocate for ourselves. We are practicing opinion forming. People with disabilities aren't asked for their opinion enough so some may think that their opinion doesn't matter or that they don't have anything creative to offer. In our workshops we know that isn't true and we work on our opinion forming skills.

Virtual theatre (theatre rehearsed and performed online) comes with its own challenges. Performers need devices (laptops, tablets, etc) to take the workshops on, a strong internet connection, and they need to be able to use the devices and internet programs. It also may be difficult for performers to focus on the workshop because of other distractions in their homes. I have found that some performers really enjoy doing theatre online because they feel more comfortable and safer than they do in person. One performer I worked with in person before the lockdown was shy and quiet. She didn't

like when everyone was watching her so she didn't participate very much. When she came to the online workshops she shined, participating fully from the comfort of her living room with a big smile on her face. When she would say her name and do an action (a ritual we do at the beginning of every rehearsal) she would do a big hair flip and a spin showing us how sassy, strong and powerful she feels. She was advocating for herself. For many performers, online theatre workshops give them safety and more freedom to explore from a home base that they are familiar with and that meets their physical needs.

### **Ritual: Opening and Closing Rehearsal**

Ritual is the act of doing something over and over again. Ritual has always played an important role in the theatre. Ritual also has a long history in disability and autistic communities for very similar reasons. Rituals give us a sense of safety and comfort. . . . Wherever our creativity leads us we can always come back to our rituals. Autistic people use rituals in their daily lives in the form of repeating phrases, stimming and having routines.

### **The Circle**

When rehearsals take place in person I always build a circle out of chairs in the center of the room for us to meet. This is part of our ritual and a formation we can come back to during our rehearsal when we need time to think and process. It is also our way of sharing power and treating each other equally.

The question is; how do we create a circle online? We can't actually form a real circle so I try to make it feel like we are in an opening circle at the beginning of our workshop. I do this by giving us time to settle into our online workshop before we do any activities. I start every rehearsal 5 minutes after its set time, this allows us all to see each other, take each other in and talk about whatever we want. I don't lead any activity or conversation. I just let the circle form itself and this is a part of our opening ritual.

### **The Name Game**

Once our 5 minutes of circle forming ends, we do an exercise called the Name Game inspired by similar exercises by Augusto Boal.<sup>6</sup> One at a time each person says their name and does an action. Any action that is completely unique to them. Then, everyone repeats their name and action back to them. We know whose turn it is because I "spotlight" the person which makes them the only person on all our screens. This way they know we are watching and listening to them when they are doing their name actions. When doing this exercise for the first time with new performers it can sometimes be difficult for everyone. If you get to someone who is unsure of what to do, be sure to wait for them, give them time to think about what they want to share and have their moment in the spotlight. This exercise takes as long as it takes. This is the very first moment of devised theatre and when we are finished every participant has devised something. Sometimes I put this exercise into our final performance instead of

a bow. Through this exercise we are telling each other that everyone's ideas are important and valuable.

### **Czechoslovakia**

Even though this is a physical warm-up I always make sure to mention that standing is optional (to consider those who are wheelchair users or have physical limitations or just don't feel comfortable standing). This exercise is very repetitive which makes it easy to learn and remember. It is a combination of both spoken word and physical action. When we bring in exercises to workshops with performers with disabilities we want to make sure everyone can participate in some way. Performers who communicate and express themselves through speaking can speak the words in this exercise, while those who don't communicate that way may want to focus more on the body movements.

The spoken words are "Czechoslovakia boom sha boom, Yugoslavia boom sha boom let's get the rhythm of the hands" and we clap twice "we got the rhythm of the hands" and we clap twice again. Then we repeat this all over again, this time adding the feet and then again adding the head, then hips and the whole body. The whole-body movement we call the "hatcha" (I.e "let's get the rhythm of the hatcha"). Over the years of doing this exercise at the beginning of every rehearsal (following the name game) a few interesting things have happened. Some of the quieter performers started adding their own sounds to the movements so we've added them to the exercise. Now when we do the head movement we say "ding dong," thanks to a performer who added it in. For the hips we do a "boom, boom, boom" sound that another performer added. These opening exercises help us warm up and get ready to create theatre.

### **Closing**

No matter what I always leave time for the name game at the end. Performers can do the same thing they did at the beginning of rehearsal or try out a new action, whatever feels best for them.

## **Some Other Devised Theatre Exercises for a Zoom Rehearsal**

### **Come, Come My friends**

This exercise is adapted from the work of Augusto Boal.<sup>6</sup> This exercise has a repetitive phrase, similar to Czechoslovakia. One at a time, one performer says "come, come my friends who..." and fills in the phrase with something that applies to them. It can be something they have or want or like or hate. Once the participant has said their phrase, I ask everyone "who else does this apply to?" and have them raise their hands. Everyone who raises their hand has to make a picture with their body. For example; "come, come my friends who like pizza" would be followed by anyone who likes pizza making an image with their body of someone who likes pizza. I then ask participants to freeze in their pose while we look at each other's poses. Through this exercise we learn about each other and our common interests. This exercise helps us build community.

## What Are You Doing?

One performer does an action, and another asks them “what are you doing?” When the performer tells the asker what they are doing the asker then has to do that action too. After a moment the asker creates their own action, and another participant asks them what they are doing and the cycle continues until all participants have had a turn.

## Brain Gym

These exercises are fun and playful. It’s important to make theatre in a joyful way. This is important now, more than ever during these difficult times of the pandemic.

I find these exercises are best taught in this order. It might be best to teach the first exercise in one rehearsal and then build on the next one the following week. They are specifically designed for an online platform like Zoom.

### Exercise 1:

Performers are given a number of commands with accompanying actions:

- i. In—bring your fists together in front of your chest, elbows out to the sides
- ii. Out—open your hands (jazz hands) and put arms out no bent elbows
- iii. Up—point index fingers, hands next to your face pointing up
- iv. Down—point index fingers, hands in front of your chest pointing down
- v. Dab—Dab to one of the top corners of your screen

### Exercise 2

- i. Ship—stay in frame as centered as possible
- iii. Swab the Deck—pretend to clean the camera lens
- iv. Walk the Plank—take three steps toward the camera then fall out of the frame
- v. Mermaid—do your very best mermaid singing
- vi. Man Overboard—fall off the ship to the one side
- vii. I Spy—move your eye as close to the camera as you can
- viii. Captain’s Coming—everyone snaps to attention and salutes.

## One Word Story

This exercise can help the group find a theme for your theatre creation or if you already have a theme it can help you start building your theatre creation. Every performer adds

a word (or sentence) one at a time, creating a story. I also encourage movement with the word (or sentence) or instead of a word or sentence.

### **Choosing a Theme/Starting point**

While some of our performances don't have a theme it is often useful to pick a theme, topic and/or some general points of interest to focus our performance around. I'll be honest, this part is never easy and never goes the same way twice. There are performers I've worked with for years and at that point this becomes easier but when working with a first-time group this can be tough. Here are a few things you can try to help you pick a theme:

-Examples - I often bring in traditional Indigenous stories from around the world. Many of which feature animals. We read them together and voice the different characters and talk about the structure of a story and the lessons hidden within it. One story I introduce to our canon often is a creation story, that Thomas King titles "Woman Who Fell from the Sky".<sup>13</sup> In this creation story the world is created through a group effort, teamwork. This is just like how we create *Theatre of Neurodiversity*. We have also looked at the traditional African stories of Anansi the spider. Then we set out to make our own. I ask the participants what kind of lessons we'd like to teach our audience and what is going on in our world that we would like to highlight. In one rehearsal one of the participants brought up the Black Lives Matter movement and I asked him to explain to the group what Black Lives Matter meant to him. The story created ended up being about a king who was afraid of the superheroes in his community and wanting them to be stopped. He builds a wall around his castle to keep the superheroes out but the community stands behind the superheroes shouting "Super powers are beautiful!" and begin to take down the wall. The king eventually joins them in the long journey of taking down the wall piece by piece. I also use poetry a lot as examples. Poetry often has patterns and themes that can inspire our own poems and songs. We used the poem "I Am Canadian" by Duke Redbird in which every line starts with the words "I am." This example allowed us to write a poem where we could each contribute a line describing what/who we are.

-Brainstorming - Sometimes I don't use examples. Sometimes we brainstorm, popcorn style. I pull up a blank document and ask for ideas, words, colors, feelings, current and upcoming events and we just write them all down and then comb through them looking for what they have in common with each other.

-Music - Many performers I've worked with over the years have favorite songs and artists, some from musicals and movies. I encourage performers to bring their songs in, we listen to them with the lyrics on the screen and sing along if we choose to. We then look at common themes and patterns to make our own work, songs or otherwise.

### **Movement and Sign Language**

In Disability Arts/*Theatre of Neurodiversity* there are performers who communicate using spoken words and those who communicate without any words and a bunch of performers who do a little bit of both. Similarly, there are those who read and need

words written down to help them and those who get their information by listening to it being said to them or in other ways. Creating movement pieces and dances is a big part of the work we do. When we explored the “I am Canadian” poem and then created our own poems that were similar, we also created a movement piece. I had participants say their “I am...” line and create an action/piece of movement to go with it. Much like the name game we repeated their line and movement back to them. We then put each new line of movement together until everyone’s lines were spoken and danced. We created our own poem dance and then did it with music.

We use basic sign language quite a bit in our rehearsals. We often attach signs to poems or songs we are working on.

### **What are the shows like?**

I get this question a lot. Everyone is curious about how making theatre with people with intellectual disabilities and neurodiversity is possible and how we do it online. What is most exciting about what we do is that none of our shows look the same because we are always open to creating something totally new. What we create belongs to the disability community, so we do not try to control it or put any rules on it that are not a part of that community’s experience.

### **Technology: Why We Never Mute**

Technology is very hard for me. Many people with disabilities need technology to help them communicate and access things they need, so it is important that I continue learning about technology even when it’s difficult for me.

Most people making online theatre use a program called Zoom, which is a monthly subscription of around \$20 CAD. I have also used Streamyard which is actually designed for live performances, broadcasts and podcasts and can let you add some graphics and videos to your show that Zoom can’t.

By now, 9 months into the pandemic, most of us are very familiar with Zoom; using it not just for work meetings but also for conferences, performances, birthday parties and get togethers. Using Zoom can make us tired. The theatre exercises included in this book can help us keep our energy up on Zoom.

When people host Zoom sessions they usually ask the people participating to be on mute. That doesn’t work for online *Theatre of Neurodiversity*. We will not be telling each other to “be quiet.” This may make things confusing sometimes. It often takes a lot of repeating but everyone is heard. And that is the heart of *Theatre of Neurodiversity*; a theatre that leaves space for things to work differently. Like Thomas King’s creation story; *Theatre of Neurodiversity* is not about one person telling everyone else what to do. It is a bunch of people working together, who don’t have all the answers, but when they work together they create their world.<sup>13</sup>