



Sensory Accessibility Practices in Theatre and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

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Abstract

On July 26, 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law, creating the world's first in depth legislation regarding equality for people with disabilities. In a speech given at the signing, Bush stated that the act would provide people with disabilities the "opportunity to blend fully and equally into the rich mosaic of the American mainstream." The vision of ADA, however, has not been fully realized for those with sensory and cognitive differences, which include sensory sensitivities, intellectual and developmental disabilities. In the arts and cultural sector, there is a growing understanding that an entire constituency is being left out when sensory sensitivities are not considered. Theatre companies are perhaps the latest to the game, with the move beyond a standard trigger warning to provision of sensory-friendly performances and environments as a recent addition to considerations.

This document will discuss the relevant definitions and history of disability rights in the United States in the arts. Through looking at the work of Imagination Stage (Bethesda, Maryland) and Fulton Theatre (Lancaster, Pennsylvania) in their creation of sensory accessible and inclusive programming and experiences, best practices will be examined and evaluated. In doing so, it will provide recommendations and discuss what changes can be implemented in order to become more fully ADA compliant.

Sensory Accessibility: Innovation & Implementation in Theatres

Within the arts, theatre in particular provides an extrasensory experience that engages all the audience's senses in creating a performance. However, the stimulating nature of theatre can often make it the least accessible to those with sensory sensitivities. For theatre companies, it has become increasingly important to include sensory accessibility within a general accessibility plan. This addition is important both for the company as well as patrons with sensory sensitivities who would be directly affected by the creation of more inclusive programs and environments.

Primarily, the disabilities that could hold sensory implications are mental and can be categorized as intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). IDD affect mental capacity, behavioral functioning, and cognitive ability. People with these disabilities may need a higher level of support, often in the form of allowing them to participate in the way that allows them to enjoy the experience. Within the category of IDD, sensory processing issues broadly relate to the way in which the brain organizes information received through the senses. Processing issues can range from a hypersensitivity, or overstimulation, to hyposensitivity, or understimulation. While some are avoidant of sensory information, most have a method of counteracting the stimulation by self-stimulating through moving, fidgeting and seeming to focus their attention elsewhere.¹ The stereotypical assumption when presented with the idea of serving people with an IDD, particularly in theatre, is catering to those on the autistic spectrum. Brain injuries, psychiatric disabilities, and attention disorders are also considered, as these all may hold difficulties processing information, receiving sensory information, and behavior or communication in society.²

Sensory accessibility can be defined as creating an inclusive environment for those with sensory sensitivities and thus related disabilities. The goal of sensory accessibility is always to make

¹ Understood Team. "Understanding Sensory Processing Issues," *Understood*. Retrieved from <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/understanding-sensory-processing-issues>.

² "Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities," *NIH Fact Sheets*. Retrieved from <https://report.nih.gov/NIHfactsheets/ViewFactsheet.aspx?csid=100>.

an experience predictable and familiar for the individual with sensory, social, or cognitive disabilities by making small adaptations that both meet the need of the individual and ensure the experience remains fundamentally similar to what a neurotypical individual would experience. For the arts in particular, this involves considerations of the organization both in terms of artistic product and the general environment of the venue, including the supports available. For theatres, the scope of sensory accessibility often varies in what is undertaken and how based off what is possible for the organization. Because any number of the senses can be affected, there is a need to control lights, noises, smells, textures, crowds and spaces, visual stimulation, and the intensity of information. The methods to reduce these factors as barriers to the theatre span from listing the specific moments that one with a sensory sensitivity might need support to the curation of an adapted environment and performance to meet the needs of these individuals.³

One of the simplest ways to assist in the sensory experience that theatres already take advantage of is by listing out moments that may require a higher level of support. Initially, the use of trigger warnings became the standard for theatre to warn of any potentially sensitive, startling, or hazardous content and effects, such as use of strobing lights, the sound of a gunshot, or the depiction of sensitive situations. Maintaining and expanding off of the importance of these warnings, theatres have begun creating social and story narratives.² Social narratives often cover the broader experience of attending the theatre, telling audiences what to expect during the experience and informing any questions on how to act in the process of attending. Some theatres have video versions of their social narrative, showing people talking about and going through the process of attending the theatre to give audience members visuals of how attending will be. Most theatres will offer the opportunity to do a test run of attending the theatre, including how to pick up or purchase

³ Ideishi, Roger I. "Current Programming Trends in Cultural Arts Settings for Persons with Sensory, Social, & Cognitive Disorders," *Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs*. Retrieved from http://www.miamidadearts.org/sites/default/files/files/inline/2014.07.23_-_vsa_pennsylvania_workshop_sensory_friendly_theater_v3.pdf.

a ticket, entering the theatre, and finding, or as it's often called, meeting your seat. Story narratives are specific to the play they are attending. The story narrative maps out the moments that could be unexpected or triggering, describing them in detail to ensure audiences are comfortable in the knowledge of what will happen during the show. Often, theatres will have a single social narrative for all shows and a story narrative for each show, but on occasion a theatre will combine the social and story narratives in favor of creating a comprehensive social narrative. These narratives, in any form, serve as ways for audiences to prepare for the unfamiliar, creating an environment in which they can have comfort and enjoyment in the theatre.

In connection with the items in these narratives, theatres continue to expand into creating a performance and environment adapted to suit the needs of an audience with sensory sensitivities. Because the lobbies of theatres are both the first environment in a theatre and potentially overwhelming, lobbies are equipped with a series of resources that can be utilized. Companies who have chosen to cater to an audience with sensory sensitivities often create separate areas or rooms, commonly referred to as sensory break rooms. Standard in educational settings, sensory break areas or rooms allow for someone overstimulated by the environment or someone who self-stimulates to function within the public space to take a break in a quiet area removed from the primary environment.⁴ Theatres often also have fidgets or other toys for those who need the stimulation fidgeting during a show provides in order to process the show. Headphones are also offered as a method to block auditory stimulation of the environment. Some theatres, contrary to what is commonly considered proper in theatre, will allow the use of technology in performances. In order to assist in counteracting overstimulation and allowing for under stimulated individuals to enjoy theatre, specific changes are made within the show and the theatre itself.

⁴ "A Sensory Room... The Best Space To Create For Some Awesome Relaxation Or Stimulation. Let's Start Building!" *Sensory Processing Disorder*. Retrieved from <https://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com/sensory-room.html>.

There are a number of adaptations that can be made to a show and inside the theatre that can make the show comply with what would allow audiences with sensory sensitivities to enjoy a performance. The simplest of these changes involves the provision that audiences can move freely around the theatre with the house lights partially on; these are called relaxed performances and are offered in order to provide a way in which individuals can stimulate in order to process information as well as allowing audiences the ability to easily leave the theatre if needed. Because most theatres will already have the story narrative or a list of trigger warnings, some theatres have a light or volunteer who raises a light in warning of the moments laid out on the lists. This particularly allows audiences the time to prepare for the moment and the possibility of a trigger. Some theatres, if they have the time, will minimize or eliminate light shifts and turn down the volume on sound effects to reduce the effect of the stimuli. Broadly, any performances that utilize methods of performance beyond just the provisions of a relaxed performance are called sensory-friendly performances. While there are numerous ways in which theatres can incorporate sensory accessibility both into performance and the general environment, the importance of and reason for these provisions is reflected in each initiative.

The central ideology of creating sensory accessible environments and performances is to make potentially unfamiliar and unpredictable circumstances in the theatre a comfortable and inclusive experience for those with sensory sensitivities. One of the discrepancies to be addressed is the difference between the behavioral rules we have come to prescribe to the arts and the response to how audiences receive information, which is related to making the environment inclusive. While the general etiquette of theatre involves audiences staying seated and quiet with phones turned off and paying close attention to the show, this does not always reflect how those with sensory sensitivities could best enjoy the theatre. The initiative of providing audiences in sensory-friendly performances with the opportunity to move freely in a theatre and use technology, fidgets, or other

toys is a response to the variation in how people process information. For example, a child may need to self-stimulate in the form of fidgeting or walking in order to concentrate on what is occurring on stage.

The importance of sensory accessibility has long been underrated and overlooked. Due to the sometimes invisible nature of a sensory sensitivity of the public assumption that those with sensory sensitivities would not attend performances, the arts have only recently made changes to accommodate an underserved portion of their constituencies. Theatres began considering sensory accessibility in 2010, with Broadway's *Lion King* being the first to be well known for a sensory-friendly performance. Even with these changes being addressed, sensory accessibility often extends more to children's theatre rather than theatre in general. However, the psychological importance of sensory accessibility establishes the necessity to offer these programs to all ages, addressing crucial opportunity for social practice and inclusion.

One of the considerations especially undertaken by occupational therapists is how inclusion in community activities both from a young age and in adult life can positively affect the lives of members of the disability community. In particular, occupational therapists believe that community engagement can assist in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Integration into community activities, in this case theatre, can help in developing social skills and relationships. Being exposed to sensory stimuli and an environment in which one can practice communication skills encourages social practice that could prove helpful in the independence and continued participation in the community. Because of the judgement free zone that sensory accessible programs in theatres offer, the individual can be encouraged to be themselves. Research on this found a causal relationship between low house lights in theatres and individuals having a feeling that they could be themselves

($p < .05$).⁵ Predictability of sounds created by the use of detailed story narratives causes a stronger feeling of relaxation ($p > .05$),⁶ further allowing individuals to feel comfortable in the environment. This comfort and feeling of individuality can extend to society outside of the theatre, as people will leave the theatre feeling more confident in being themselves. Achieving social development, however, can only occur if an accepting environment is created.

Similar to the experiences of all marginalized groups, it is important to create a safe space in which those with sensory sensitivities can participate in society to the fullest extent. A safe space is defined as “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.”⁷ Creating a safe space in the theatre for individuals with sensory sensitivities helps both them and their families. If the individual is in this safe space, they know that they are allowed to participate in a way that allows for the most enjoyment. By creating a haven of sorts, it is communicated to the individual that the arts are inclusive and a place to be yourself, a narrative that is frequently pushed in theatre particularly. For families, outings with an individual with sensory sensitivities can both limit the options for participation and create an uncomfortable, isolating situation in which there is a feeling of being looked at as the ‘others.’ Research into organizations that provided these programs and gave families a social environment to bond showed a causal relationship between the environment and a stronger family experience ($p < .05$).⁴ When the arts and particularly theatre become a safe space, the theatre can play a role in affecting the public perception of those with disabilities.

As a long established trend in American society, individuals with disabilities, particularly those associated with a sensory sensitivity, were not understood and at times society was wary of

⁵ Ideishi, Roger. “Sensory Friendly Performances,” *Michigan Presenters*. Retrieved from <https://www.michiganpresenters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Sensory-Friendly-Performances-Powerpoint-Slides.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid. Ideishi, pg. 8

⁷ “Safe space.” *Oxford Living Dictionary*. Retrieved from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/safe_space.

these individuals; these feelings often came out of ignorance of disability culture and the experiences of these individuals and their families. With the advent of sensory accessibility and sensory-friendly programs, the experiences and needs of these individuals are coming to light, having the effect of educating the public and eliminating feelings of isolation felt by those with sensory disabilities or those interacting with these individuals. The advent of these performing arts practices also has brought to light the professional fields related to the societal functioning of those with disabilities. This also has the effect of helping people outside of the disability community understand the community and experiences better.

Of the fields related to the societal functioning of individuals with disabilities, special education and occupational therapy are important fields to consult in creating sensory accessible experiences. The individuals in these fields, as specialists in the disability experience, are knowledgeable in the modifications and considerations one should make to be inclusive of those with disabilities. In particular, these fields tend to specialize in disabilities that could include an aspect of sensory sensitivity; especially in children's theatres implementing sensory accessibility practices, special education can assist in considerations of how children will interact with a show and the organization. Frequently, companies will implement classroom engagement strategies as well as familiar elements of the classroom as a means to make the arts non-threatening and accessible. Occupational therapy, as the resource outside of the classroom for those with disabilities, encourages the performance of daily tasks as well as participation in societal offerings to live a meaningful life and diminish the effect of challenges presented by a disability. In consulting these professionals, they can assist in considerations of organizational needs for inclusion as well as general education for the public and those within the organization in order to create an inclusive and approachable program.⁸

⁸ Ibid. Ideishi, pg. 5

While the audience is most important in sensory accessible experiences, there are also staff and cast considerations in how a theatre goes about obtaining a further level of sensory accessibility. Perhaps most related to the audience experience, it is important that there are staff members trained in accessibility practices, particularly in the education and audience services departments. As these people are most likely to interact with the audience members, it is imperative that they have an understanding of how to best address needs both before and during the show. While the hope is that someday sensory accessibility will be widespread enough that everyone has an understanding of what a sensory-friendly performance entails, having someone well versed in accessibility and sensory-friendly performances discuss with performers what to expect can allow the show to run smoothly regardless of additional changes to the program that have been made. Making performers aware of some possible audience responses and what they can expect gives the performers a comfortable experience that allows them to present a show that is true to what would be presented in any other performance. As the liaisons between the audience and the production, administrative and creative staff are responsible for creating a sensory accessible experience that allows sensory sensitive audiences to enjoy theatre to the extent that was originally intended.⁹

Under the current legislation, sensory accessibility, as defined in this chapter, is a consideration to be made. Because it has long been left out of major legislation, it is often not a priority to create an inclusive environment for those with sensory differences beyond catering to those who are deaf and blind. Out of the 56.7 million Americans with disabilities, over 6% at least is comprised of people whose disability could cause a sensory sensitivity;¹⁰ this constituency is growing and cannot be ignored any longer. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), in

⁹ "Guidelines for Presenting a 'Sensory-Friendly' Cultural Event," *Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs*. Retrieved from https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/documents/conference/Guidelines_for_Presenting_S-F_Cultural%20Event_9.18.2013.pdf.

¹⁰ Brault, Matthew W. "Americans With Disabilities: 2010," *United States Census Bureau*. Retrieved from <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2012/demo/p70-131.pdf>.

consideration with the amendments to the Act in 2008 and the principles of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA) frequently adopted in the values statements of arts organizations, sensory accessibility in the form of creating sensory-friendly performances and environments should be a requirement. The addition of sensory-friendly performances both to accessibility checklists made by leading arts agencies and to the rules of ADA compliance would allow for arts organizations to become more inclusive to their audiences.

Legislation, Organizational Values, & Sensory Accessibility

While the history of civil rights is extensive, the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the discussion about basic human rights came years after most civil rights legislature. Beyond this, the discussion over sensory sensitivities and related disabilities has only become a topic of discussion in the last decade. The arts, and theatre in particular, are taking note of how society treats those with disabilities, and accommodations for participation are being established.

In 1973, after widespread protest to President Nixon's veto of the legislation, the Rehabilitation Act was passed. This legislation served as a major addition to the work of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, and ethnicity. The Rehabilitation Act outlaws discrimination of those defined as having a disability both in working environments and general societal activity. The Act defines an individual with a disability as a person who has a mental or physical impairment that "substantially limits one or more major life activities." In particular, Section 504 of the Act isolates programs utilizing federal funding, mandating that individuals with disabilities should have access and the ability to participate in these programs.¹¹ The ideas presented in this legislation, including the language defining who is considered to have a disability by the United States government, provided the beginnings of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

At its core, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) holds the same mission as the Rehabilitation Act to make discrimination on the basis of disability illegal to the same extent as those traits listed in the Civil Rights Act. In its original form, substantial evidence was laid out to establish why the legislature was being passed. Aside from citing the history of discrimination against individuals with disabilities and the lack of legal recourse under the Civil Rights Act, one of

¹¹ "The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehab Act)," *Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion*. Retrieved from <http://www.askearn.org/topics/laws-regulations/rehabilitation-act/>.

Congress' main findings involves the participation of those with disabilities in society. Congress cites that often discrimination can be the cause of the inability to participate fully, pointing out that barriers to participation often plague the disability community. Thus, the goal of the Act is to create standards for the elimination of discrimination, similar to those standards which are laid out in the Civil Rights Act.¹² At its original passing, ADA set out to provide 43 million Americans with disabilities with rights, including the "just and fair access" to societal offerings.¹³

In 2008, amendments were written and passed on ADA to combat idiosyncrasies created by the rulings of two court cases involving ADA. In particular, the decisions made by the Supreme Court in these cases proved problematic to the classification of disability as laid out by ADA. In 1999, the case *Sutton v. United Air Lines, Inc.* examined whether or not the use of corrective measures to lessen the limitations of a disability meant that the disability could still be covered, in this case specifically dealing with the acute visual myopia of the Suttons. The final conclusion, made in a 7-2 decision siding with the Suttons, stated that if one is able to mitigate the impairment, they are no longer considered to have a disability under ADA.¹⁴ In 2002, the case *Toyota Manufacturing, Kentucky, Inc. v. Williams* sought to evaluate disability on the basis of ability to perform a job at work, particularly looking at the carpal tunnel Ella Williams had suffered through work at the manufacturing plant. The unanimous decision made in favor of Toyota Manufacturing stated that could not be considered a disability as the impairment only limited specialized tasks rather than daily tasks and spanned a shorter term than the length of impairment interpreted by the Supreme Court.¹⁵ Because of the decisions of these cases being in opposition of the original intentions of ADA and its definition of disability, the amendments proposed and later passed to ADA broadened the definition

¹² "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended," *ADA.gov*. Retrieved from <https://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.pdf>.

¹³ "Remarks of President George Bush at the Signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act," *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*. Retrieved from https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/videos/ada_signing_text.html.

¹⁴ "Sutton v. United Air Lines, Inc.," *Oyez*. Retrieved from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1998/97-1943>.

¹⁵ "Toyota Manufacturing, Kentucky, Inc. v. Williams," *Oyez*. Retrieved from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2001/00-1089>.

of a disability and included provisions that allow for an individual to more easily comply with a burden of proof when wanting to be covered under ADA.¹⁶

Subchapter three of ADA lays out what constitutes public discrimination, clarifying a point to ensure there is no ambiguity. Discrimination in the public sphere relies heavily on the idea that a failure to make readily achievable modifications to be more accessible by nature intrudes on the ability for full and equal enjoyment, or inclusivity. By this, ADA lays out that if a modification is “easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense,” the change must be made unless the entity can prove that it is not readily achievable based on situational or financial factors. While looking at finances, general organizational resources, and structure are recommended in determining the feasibility of a change, the provision laying out what constitutes an acceptable inability. ADA statutes state that an acceptable failure to make such accommodations would include a decision to not make changes in order to avoid a fundamental change to the good itself. The process of becoming accessible is accounted for by the legislature in a statute regarding the fact that an entity will not be considered discriminatory if it is taking the necessary steps to ensure inclusion.¹⁷

In building accessibility into services, ADA provides guidelines as to what is and is not acceptable when making changes necessary. At its most basic level, an entity is prohibited from denying anyone the ability to participate on the basis of disability. This forms the basis of approaches to creating accessible services, as ADA seems to indicate that any inability to participate, whether intentional or not, can be considered a denial and discrimination against a person with a disability. Programs and services are determined to have the requirements of providing an equal and integrated benefit to be considered nondiscriminatory. In terms of an equal benefit, programs are

¹⁶ “Amendment of Americans With Disabilities Act Title II and Title III Regulations To Implement ADA Amendments Act of 2008,” *Federal Register*. 11 August 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-08-11/pdf/2016-17417.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid. “Americans...” pg. 14

required to provide a benefit to an individual with a disability that is of equal value to the benefit of other individuals. The topic of an integrated setting and service relates to the fact that it is considered discriminatory to provide individuals with a disability with services that differ or are entirely separate from those provided to other individuals. One of the goals in creating these guidelines is to work to end the stigma around, and isolation of, those with disabilities and their families.¹⁸ Today, the census indicates a population of 56.7 million Americans with a disability that benefit from the legislation put in place allowing them to participate fully in all public accommodations.¹⁹

The anti-discrimination principles presented in both the Rehabilitation Act and ADA provide the basis of the proper treatment of people with disabilities to be followed by all public entities. As organizations that provide a good to the public and provide for a constituency in society, theatre companies fall into the category of those that must comply both with the Rehabilitation Act and ADA. Most theatre companies take some form of public money, either from federal, state and/or local governments, in order to operate. In accordance with the anti-discrimination policies laid out in the Rehabilitation Act, theatre companies would constitute a group needing to consider how their programs are affecting those with disabilities to ensure there is no discrimination present as they receive government funding.²⁰ Because a physical theatre is considered a location of public gathering, a company residing within would be considered as a public accommodation under ADA. This would require them to follow the principles laid out in subchapter three of ADA in order to ensure the equal enjoyment of services by their constituents with disabilities.¹⁴ In response to the principles laid out by ADA and civil rights in general, the arts operate under the common nonprofit

¹⁸ Ibid. "Americans..." pg. 14

¹⁹ Ibid. Brault, pg. 11

²⁰ Ibid. "The Rehabilitation..." pg. 12

principle of IDEA to ensure compliance with ADA is not only a requirement by law but an important value and organizational guiding principle.

IDEA, which stands for inclusion, diversity, equity, and access, holds ADA at its core. In the arts, IDEA applies both to internal and external constituencies served by the mission and programming. In relation to external constituents, or audiences, IDEA proves to be a principle for ensuring all feel welcome, represented, and acknowledged. Inclusion refers to the emotional state of feeling valued, accepted, and comfortable participating. Diversity, relating perhaps the most to civil rights in general, refers to the ability of a company to represent and welcome everyone regardless of their traits or situations. Equity invokes the idea of ensuring everyone has the same amount of support they need to feel they can easily participate. Access refers to the ability of a person to enter a space; while this primarily creates thoughts of physical accessibility, this can also refer to a range of mental and emotional accessibility.²¹ Of these, all are often related to inclusion; if diversity, equity, and access are carried out correctly, constituents will feel included in the offerings of the entity. Sensory accessibility, accordingly, falls at the intersection between access and inclusion.

Often overlooked, sensory accessibility is a more recent consideration in relation to both IDEA and ADA. The notion of interpreting the language of ADA to include any cognitive or intellectual disabilities was not conceived of until the 2008 amendments when Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder was included as an example of what constitutes a mental impairment under the definition of disability.²² Because the arts and IDEA tend to take cues off of ADA and the most current civil rights legislation, sensory accessibility was not conceived as a fully realized idea until 2011, a few years after ADA begun invoking changes that were indicative of a view of a

²¹ "Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (I.D.E.A) Definitions – English and French," Association of Fundraising Professionals. 26 September 2018. Retrieved from <https://afpglobal.org/inclusion-diversity-equity-and-access-idea-definitions>.

²² Ibid. "Amendment..." pg. 15

broader range of disabilities. As a budding principle of IDEA, sensory accessibility works to bring in the approximately 15.2 million person constituency of people with mental disabilities.²³

At the cores of both IDEA and the arts in general is the idea that the arts are for everyone. Within the mission of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the governmental agency prioritizes providing Americans with various forms of arts participation through the initiatives they have committed to as well as research into arts participation they have conducted. Among the national initiatives specifically targeted at involving the arts in all aspects of life and society is the Arts & Human Development Task Force, which observes ways in which the arts work in health and education for Americans, looking at ways the arts can be further integrated into the future of society. Americans for the Arts (AFTA), a research organization focusing on the value of the arts, conducted research into the impact of the arts on society as well as the American perception of the role of the arts. Both AFTA and the NEA have recently published research regarding arts participation and the role of the arts. According to NEA research in the Survey of Public Participation from 2012 indicates that 37% of Americans attended a performing arts event in the last year, with just 18% having attended a theatrical event; the research also indicated that arts participation through attendance in general was around 49%.²⁴ The high percentages of arts participation point to the question of why people participate in the arts, which further stems back to why the NEA has an interest in looking for ways to integrate the arts more fully into society. Further data into arts participation in the disability community indicates that a mere 13.3% have attended a play or musical.²⁵ Research into the public perception of the arts presented by AFTA indicates that Americans see the arts as a widespread experience that adds value and meaning to the lives of

²³ Ibid. Brault, pg. 11

²⁴ "How a Nation Engages with Art: Highlights from the 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA)," National Endowment for the Arts. Retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/highlights-from-2012-sppa-revised-oct-2015.pdf>.

²⁵ "Arts attendance and reading rates for U.S. adults with disabilities in 2017 (statistical tables)," *National Endowment for the Arts*. Retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis/arts-data-profiles/arts-data-profile-18>.

individuals and a community. This research, however, also indicates that Americans are aware that not everyone has access to the arts.²⁶ Although research has indicated to importance to Americans of access, these organizations do not include sensory accessibility on resources such as accessibility checklists created by the NEA and AFTA-affiliated organizations such as Art Works.²⁷ Due to these not being included on the resources many arts organizations turn to as guidelines for accessibility, these organizations are not truly fulfilling their missions and are doing arts organizations a disservice by failing to inform them of the latest trends in inclusion.

While parts of sensory accessibility are still being learned and integrated into common practice, it represents the latest iteration of the vision of the arts as something everyone can enjoy. Sensory accessibility serves as a true intersection between access and inclusion. For those with sensory sensitivities, both the environment and the experience must have some element of sensory relief in order for those constituencies to both get through the door and enjoy their time with an organization. The ability for sensory accessibility to also provide for the inclusivity of a constituency creates a unique opportunity usually not associated with other forms of accessibility. For example, the modification of a building itself to construct wheelchair ramps may serve as a point of physical access, but it does not necessarily enhance the enjoyment of the individual. The allowance for a child to roam the theatre during a performance, however, allows them the opportunity to process and enjoy the show in the way that is harmonious with how they process information. Because of the principles from ADA covered by use of sensory accessibility by theatres, sensory accessibility should be a point of consideration for theatre companies in order to be compliant with ADA.

When sensory accommodations are not made in relation to a program, not only does this constitute discrimination on the basis of not making an attempt for modifications but also on the

²⁶ "What Americans Say About the Arts in 2018," Americans for the Arts. Retrieved from <https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/101583>.

²⁷ "2010 Revised Regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act Titles II and III," *Art Works*. Retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-ADA-TipSheet-v2.pdf>.

basis that the lack of accommodations creates a barrier. This barrier is in the form of ensuring individuals with disabilities cannot fully or equally enjoy the offerings of the theatre in the same way that other individuals can. Beyond this, the companies that have begun making modifications to be inclusive of those with sensory sensitivities showcases the readily achievable nature of the change. One of the considerations is the existence of grants to make companies ADA compliant. While these grants currently exist for physical accessibility, there is potential in the future for these grant programs to be expanded for the inclusion of sensory accessibility. While sensory accessibility is not a one-time expense in the same way physical accessibility is, a grant such as this could go a long way in establishing a program for sensory accessibility with a fund of reserves to support the program. Even without these potential grants, however, incorporating sensory accessible practices into the regular operation of theatres follows the requirements of being easily accomplished and not expensive at its most basic level.

Creating a sensory accessible environment is the more difficult and expensive side of modifications, but even this is as simple as creating an area of your lobby set aside as a sensory break space. The creation of sensory friendly performances usually requires only the adjustment of sound levels, the possible adjustment of lights, creation of sensory materials, a staffer to stand by the stage to indicate moments that might be overwhelming, and having a discussion with the cast about what they should expect. In the creation of sensory friendly performances and spaces, however, it is important to note the ADA statutes dictating integration and the benefit received from services.

In ADA, two ideas are presented as to how modifications must be made in order to have the modification have been of value to anti-discrimination policies. One of these ideas is that the individual with a disability must receive equal benefit from the services as other individuals.²⁸ In theatres, while shows are subjective and people may all naturally feel differently about the show, the

²⁸ Ibid. "Americans..." pg. 14

allowance for walking around during sensory friendly performances allows for an individual with a disability to process the material in the same way any other individual might, thus allowing them an equitable opportunity for enjoyment. Another idea presented is that of utilizing the most integrated setting, meaning that modifications should always be made in a way in which individuals with disabilities can benefit from a performance alongside others.²⁹

Occupational therapist Roger Ideishi best exemplifies these principles by noting that major changes to accommodate those with disabilities should not be made. By stating this, in no way was he saying sensory-friendly programs should not be created. Rather, he was simply stating that to be in line with ADA, the modifications made to a program should not affect the performance in any major way. The goal, he says, is participation, and any changes made should not isolate the experience of a sensory sensitive audience from the experience of a neurotypical audience.³⁰

Creating opportunities for those with disabilities to be involved in the enjoyment of theatre is becoming a desired part of ADA and IDEA compliance. The changes represent a broader destigmatization of disability, particularly mental disabilities.

²⁹ Ibid. "Americans..." pg. 14

³⁰ Sung, Hugh. "Roger Ideishi, Occupational Therapist and Arts Advocate." A Musical Life. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xc-vBZenNKw>.

Imagination Stage: A Case Study

Founded in 1979 as the Bethesda Academy of Performing Arts, Imagination Stage began as a source for arts education in the area. After changing their name in 2001, Imagination Stage shifted their focus to being both a source for theatre education in the classroom setting as well as a performance space where children can both participate in and enjoy performances.³¹ Beginning in 2012, they employed the consulting expertise of Roger Ideishi in the creation of an inclusive environment for children with disabilities wanting to participate in theatre.³² Today, they employ a team of two people in charge of access and inclusion measures; this team is led by Access Coordinator Scott Turner, and this team works within both the education and production departments to ensure the inclusivity measures celebrated by the theatre. As Turner mentioned in an interview about the sensory accessibility measures of Imagination Stage, they have become a destination for sensory accessible theatre experiences for those with higher need.³³ Embracing this identity, Imagination Stage holds inclusion at the core of everything they do.

The mission of Imagination Stage, as listed on their website, is to empower “ALL young people to discover their voice and identity through performing arts education and professional theatre.”²⁷ Slightly differing from this, their GuideStar profile lists their mission as being “to nurture the creative spirit by using theatre to open hearts, inspire minds and ignite imaginations,” through innovative professional family theatre and a variety of classes for students.³⁴ Regardless of the mission you take as their official mission, their vision for the future tracks with what the mission communicates; the theatre “envision[s] a future where theatre experiences are a fundamental aspect of children’s lives, nourishing their creative spirit, inspiring them to embrace the complexity and

³¹ *Imagination Stage*. Retrieved from imaginationstage.org.

³² Ideishi, Roger. “Roger Ideishi CV,” *Temple University*. Retrieved from <https://cph.temple.edu/sites/chpsw/files/Roger%20Ideishi%20CV%20Mar%202018.pdf>.

³³ Turner, Scott. Telephone interview. 22 March 2019.

³⁴ “Imagination Stage, Inc.,” *Guidestar*. Retrieved from <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/52-1164889>.

diversity of their world, and helping them overcome their challenges with hope, courage and, above all, creativity.”³⁵ The core values, as listed in their most recent annual report, have foundation in the importance of child development and a valuing of their own work. As would be expected in a children’s theatre with an educational component, they value empowering and investing in young people in order to nurture their growth and make a positive impact on their lives. They also largely value the work of their staff to achieve the mission and create a space where young people can explore their creativity. Perhaps most important to the organization’s values, though, is the role of inclusion and diversity.³⁶ Imagination Stage, over years of developing inclusion and accessibility initiatives, has become associated with being a theatre company for children of all ages and abilities. Their goal is to be welcome to all and representative of the diversity in the world. Each action undertaken by Imagination Stage is in the service of this mission, working on both the educational and production sides of theatre to ensure the overarching pursuit of their vision.

Imagination Stage has programming varied from education to full productions in their mainstage theatre and studios. The regular season of shows is made up of two varieties of programming based on age level. The Lerner Family Theatre series is comprised of five productions, which are appropriate for children over four or five years of age, taking place on their mainstage. Within this series, they often collaborate with other theatres to present unique works and to provide children with a story related to a current issue in society. For audiences with children between the ages of one and five, the My First Imagination Stage series presents four shows chosen specifically to include the youngest members of the audience.³¹

Within the education department, Imagination Stage offers a variety of classes in acting, musical theatre, dance, and filmmaking, most of which have a performance element as the capstone.

³⁵ Ibid. *Imagination*, pg. 22

³⁶ “Annual Report,” Imagination Stage. Retrieved from <https://imaginationstage.org/annual-report/>.

Classes span from early childhood to 12th grade, with classes divided by age group and specialized classes for children of higher need. Aside from shorter classes for children of higher need, there is a two year conservatory in which these children have the opportunity to produce a show for the theatre. In-school residencies for the local school districts primarily involve integrating the arts and opportunity for creativity into the regular curriculum and classes. For professionals in acting and arts education, professional development classes are offered to teach future actors and educators how they can better serve children and those with disabilities. During school breaks, camp programs are offered to provide students further involvement in theatre, spanning from discovering theatre to creating their own plays. To continue fostering the growth of children through their programming, Imagination Stage has a unique partnership with the DC Metropolitan Police that serves as a mentorship program between youth and officers. The DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities (DCCA), the public arts agency for the District of Columbia, supports this project in the hopes of creating outlets for creativity and encouraging a mentor relationship between police and youth.³⁷

As these programmatic offerings have expanded, Imagination Stage has utilized the expansion in ensuring they are bringing the theatrical arts and education to young people of all abilities. Specifically, they wanted to improve programs for inclusion and create a fully accessible environment. Ideishi collaborated with the theatre on creating sensory-friendly performances, infusing the theatre with his reasons for why the performances were important. As a leader in inclusion for families with children of higher need, the theatre focuses on providing children the opportunity to interact with each other and their families through providing an environment for social practice and establishing relationships with their patrons.

Imagination Stage undertakes many initiatives within sensory-friendly programming and associated accessibility measures. Once a season is selected, the access and inclusion team picks a

³⁷ Ibid. *Imagination*, pg. 22

few shows that will have sensory-friendly performances. The performances include one public performance and one field trip performance that allows students of higher need to attend a show. Typically, the team will target productions that will sell tickets the best; often, this will particularly include the musicals in the season. From there, they will read scripts and begin to map out the story for inclusion in the show's social story. The accessibility team will be hands off the show until just prior to performances, where they will watch two shows to note the moments that may need support. A sensory-friendly rehearsal is coordinated with stage management to look at the noted moments with actors and make small adjustments as necessary. The adjustments must be possible given the limitations of the changes to a single performance that can be made for the union actors they employ. During these rehearsals and particularly for musicals, the technicians will also adjust sound levels to find a volume that both is audible for the stage and not too loud for the audience. As has become standard for the theatre, productions at Imagination Stage have limited or no blackouts, meaning lights on the stage are nearly always on. Since loud noises and sudden light changes can be overwhelming for sensory sensitive audiences, these standard adjustments ensure the accessibility of the show. The adjustments that are made are listed out for the actors and posted for their reference.³⁸

For audiences, a number of actions are taken in advance of the performance to allow families to be prepared for an outing to the theatre. After taking note of moments that audiences may need higher levels of support, two versions of a social story are created, one of which is sent out ahead of time and one of which is kept on hand for the day of the show. These social stories include information on environmental expectations and a detailed account of moments needing support during the show. A general social story about the process of attending a show at Imagination Stage is published for all to catch a more in depth view of the theatre. The longer social

³⁸ Ibid. Turner, pg. 22

story includes photos, warns about repetitive concepts, and provides information to account for the diversity in how their audiences with disabilities might think. Shorter social stories, written on sturdy cardstock for the handling of audience members, includes the most important information about the show in particular. The moments listed in social stories will be signaled during the show by volunteers with glow sticks that are held up. Volunteers also act as stage guards and monitor audience movement to ensure the safety of audience members. In the lobby, the theatre posts signage indicating what to expect and provides headphones and fidgets for those that may wish to have them during a performance. For those needing a sensory break prior to or during the show, the theatre offers a sound controlled room with full view of the stage so that audiences can still enjoy the show. The house lights are partially up during shows, allowing audience members to move freely; for many children with disabilities, the ability to move around allows them to process information more fully. Additionally, seating is limited at these shows to allow for seating holes between groups to ensure a child is comfortable regardless of where they sit. The goal for these performances for Imagination Stage, in accordance with their idea of sensory accessibility being about the social aspect of the experience, is to create a show subverting the standard rules of theatre and creating a show that is as similar as possible to what neurotypical audiences will experience.³⁹

The physical space of the theatre mimics what would commonly be seen in a classroom setting for children of higher need. They utilize a red line around the perimeter of the stage, which is used in classrooms to represent a line the child should not cross unless specifically allowed to.⁴⁰ While the theatre still places volunteers at the stage to prevent children from trying to climb on stage, the recognition of what the line represents is meant to curb the frequency of this occurring. In the sound controlled break room, bean bag chairs are used as seating. These chairs, while also

³⁹ Ibid. Turner, pg. 22

⁴⁰ imaginationstage. "Imagination Stage Sensory-Friendly Performances," *YouTube*. 17 July 2014. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Q9MxfJ_OQc.

utilized in the educational programs tailored to those of higher need, are also a staple of a typical special education classroom or school sensory break spaces. The provision of fidgets, headphones, and movement during shows are often allowed in special education classes to allow students the opportunity to discover and utilize methods of how they learn. Electronic devices are allowed for communication purposes, which is frequently seen in classrooms to help a child learn the ways in which they communicate with teachers and learn. The reflection of the classroom setting on Imagination Stage is a show of how frequently they consult with those with special education backgrounds, both in the physical space and in training actors and volunteers on what to expect.⁴¹

Though two sensory-friendly performances per production may not seem like a large undertaking, Imagination Stage is one of the only theatres who have taken sensory accessibility to the scope that they have. In the past year alone, the reputation of the theatre has had the effect of doubling attendance between the winter and spring sensory-friendly performances. Despite the success, Scott Turner does not feel the need to add another sensory-friendly performance to each of the selected productions; the audiences who attend these shows are accustomed to a sensory-friendly date, so he feels there would not be the same level of return if more were added to a single production. His hope, a desire he has communicated with the theatre, is to offer two sensory-friendly performances for each show in the season rather than to a selected three. Though fighting against the limitations of personnel and time, Turner continues to believe the further expansion of the program will be possible one day. Having experienced the work the Kennedy Center does in regards to sensory access, his ultimate goal for the program is to provide audiences with wrap-around experiences; these events happening before and after the show would include activities patrons would be encouraged to come early and participate in.³⁷ Though these changes may be further down the road for the theatre, Imagination Stage has been able to utilize their mentality

⁴¹ Ibid. Turner, pg. 22

towards sensory accessibility in conjunction with their mission to become a leading name in sensory accessibility.

The work of Imagination Stage should be nothing short of inspirational to other theatres wanting to establish a sensory accessibility program. Their ideology of sensory accessibility as being more about the people than the execution allows them to tailor every initiative to suit the needs of their patrons and families. They do not believe in a set of rules on how sensory accessibility is done, but rather advocate for the necessity to undertake simple changes that suit the needs of the house and patronage. Imagination Stage has developed and cornered the market on sensory-friendly theatrical experiences, but the value of individual growth and enjoyment supersedes the notoriety.

Fulton Theatre: A Case Study

The history of the Fulton Theatre is rich due to its evolution from community center to presenting theatre. Built in 1852 and named after Lancaster County's then steam engine pioneer Robert Fulton, the theatre was originally intended as a community center space that could hold lectures and shows. After going through a series of redesigns and repurposing to a movie house, the Fulton Theatre was finally established and recognized by Actor's Equity Association as a professional regional theatre. Today, the theatre is one of eight theatres recognized as a historical landmark and works as a producing organization.⁴²

The mission of Fulton Theatre, as listed on their website, is "to create and produce exceptional theatre that moves the collective soul of our community and honors our national historic landmark." While the theatre does not list values or a vision directly, it is clear from studying how they describe themselves that a main goal is creating unique, relevant, and high quality work. They recognize that art is changing and that it is important to make a performance, while it may be a show you have experienced before, different and better than any previous time a patron has seen it. Fulton also values the community within which they operate. They seek to collaborate with the community in order to create high quality theatre. The programming of the Fulton Theatre includes both shows and educational, community programming.³⁸

Fulton Theatre produces shows spanning from straight plays to musicals. These shows cater to adults and families alike through each of the series they offer in their season. The theatre itself is comprised of two spaces, a mainstage and a studio theatre. Appropriately, the theatre has categorized shows catering more to an older audience into two series in the season. The Mainstage Series includes six musicals performed in a season, while the Studio Series includes the four straight plays in a season. The theatre also has an established Family Series, which consists of four shows

⁴² *Fulton Theatre*. Retrieved from thefulton.org.

catered for a family theatre outing. This series occurs primarily in the spring aside from a performance of *A Christmas Carol* in December. They encourage patrons to take advantage of season subscriptions to one of these three series packages, which provide a 40% discount.⁴³

Despite not having an officially staffed education department, the Fulton offers many educational opportunities related to the theatre. The Fulton Academy of Theatre offers classes for those in pre-K to grade 12 to work with some of the top theatre artists in their craft. Master classes are offered in the Fall and Spring semesters along with long term, 6 week classes with theatre professionals. Summer classes are offered for registration by both young artists and professional performers to expand their theatre knowledge and skills. These summer classes include four program areas developing different skills based on age group. The Early Childhood program is for children ages three to six and encourages creativity, development skills, and problem-solving through the basic elements of theatre, being music, dance, storytelling, and puppetry. The Elementary School program offers children the opportunity to work on voice, body, cooperation, and imagination in theatre. The Teen Conservatory offers development of performance techniques and theatrical knowledge through performance exercises. Finally, the Adult Program allows adults, whether professional performers or not, to learn skills useful in all aspects of life. Financial aid is offered to students in need of assistance in affording classes. The Fulton offers a Student Inclusion Program, ensuring people of all abilities and need can participate in theatre education. This program is instructed by a Teaching Artist who caters the program to the specific needs and interests of the student.³⁹

The Fulton Theatre does not consider themselves to take part in traditional sensory-friendly performances, though they do offer a robust set of accommodations for attending a performance. The sensory-friendly program sponsor is the Lancaster Neuroscience & Spine Associates. The goal

⁴³ Ibid. Fulton, pg. 29

of their program is to allow children with sensory needs and their families to attend shows. Though accessibility is not necessarily central to their mission, Fulton's program seems to indicate the importance of inclusion of all of their constituencies. Unique from other theatres, Fulton's approach to sensory accessibility does not utilize education staff or professional consulting. Rather, the program is largely undertaken by the community engagement staff in conjunction with house management.⁴⁴

The Fulton Theatre offers a series of adaptations for sensory-friendly programs. Prior to attending a show, they offer the opportunity for a special visit and tour so that a child can see their seat and familiarize themselves with the technical elements of the show. On these visits, children may be allowed to touch the set and costumes and experience what the sound and lights will be like during the show. Two versions of a social story are offered on their website to detail what a trip to the theatre is like. The parent version allows parents to guide their children through what the experience will be like from travelling to the theatre to how to react to the show to what to do at the end of the show. This version details what each aspect of theatre will look like and what it means to familiarize the child with what they will see. The child version provides the same information but with pictures in place of the parenthetical descriptions in the parent version. A list of possible triggers of the general experience is also provided so that parents can prepare the theatre for environmental triggers for their child.⁴⁵

The productions chosen to have the sensory-friendly program accommodations are those within the Family Series, particularly the Family Saturday Morning Series. For each show, between three and five shows will have these accommodations. Each performance is a 60 to 70 minute show, without intermission. Not having an intermission allows for the worry of crowds to be isolated to

⁴⁴ Pollard, Kelsey. Email Correspondence. 4 April 2019.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Fulton, pg. 29

before and after the show and ensures that children will not have difficulties transitioning out of and back into the show. Upon arrival at the theatre, families can pick up fidgets and headphones for use during the show. The fidgets are made by the theatre's costume departments and are provided for the entire family. During a show, children are permitted to move around the theatre and remain in the theatre for however long they would like. For those who need to take a break in the lobby, a television monitor shows the production as it is occurring. On their website, they specify that they remain flexible because they understand some may not be able to sit through a show and that moving around allows some to process information.⁴⁶ Tickets for audiences with sensory sensitivities can be purchased through an online form. Through the form, families can be given reduced pricing on tickets for productions, accommodating for the possibility that the experience will entail too much to participate in the full performance. Families have the option upon purchasing tickets to submit a request in the form for a seating buffer in case more space is needed between the individual and strangers. The organization has hopes to continue expanding their sensory accessibility offerings in the future to include sensory-friendly performances with adjustments made to the show itself.⁴⁷

While the Fulton itself does not offer sensory-friendly performances, the programmatic adaptations made still serve audiences with sensory and cognitive disabilities. The fact that they are considering expansion into sensory-friendly performances in the future is promising; it shows that they recognize what the next step will be upon getting the resources necessary to undertake these performances. The hope to expand into a more expansive sensory accessibility program, however, does seem to stem from the feeling within the organization that they are not doing enough for their audiences with sensory sensitivities. This belief is simultaneously wonderful and a terrible

⁴⁶ Ibid. Fulton, pg. 29

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pollard, pg. 32

philosophy to have. It is good because they are considering that they want to do more, but given the resources of the organization, they are doing as much as is feasible currently and would be wise to not push their resources beyond what is possible. From Fulton, we can learn that while it is important to dream big with sensory accessibility, being realistic is equally as important.

Fulton also exemplifies the fact that even if an organization does not have the resources to undertake the most stereotypical adaptations with sensory accessibility, being sensory-friendly performances, they can still undertake other environmental adaptations to ensure the comfort of the audience. Although they are not yet at the point of doing performances, the adaptations they do for sensory accessibility are by far still more than most organizations are currently doing. For instance, the personal touch of creating and distributing their own fidgets is an element that makes them stand out. Also, the fact that they have their sensory accessibility offerings on up to five performances in a single run indicates their commitment to ensuring all are included. This commitment to accessibility and inclusion is something all theatres should adopt, as it is important to ensure everyone can participate in the organization's art.

The Fulton Theatre can teach us that organizations can undertake sensory accessibility measures regardless of the resources available or the size and age of an organization. They slowly began incorporating the adaptations that they were able to and that could easily be incorporated into a regular children's program, as they do not have separate programs for audiences with sensory sensitivities. The commitment to including a sensory sensitive audience with neurotypical audiences and ensuring the appropriate accommodations are met should be commended as an important step to ensuring audiences with sensory and cognitive disabilities can enjoy productions alongside other audiences.

Resources & Recommendations

In implementing sensory accessibility measures, there is not necessarily anything that could be considered the best or only way to adapt performances. As long as a theatre is doing even the minimum to be sensory-friendly they are providing important services to the disability community. Incorporating these measures allows for the inclusion of a previously underserved segment of the population and potential audience that previously did not have the proper accommodations to attend performances. In accordance with ADA in its current iteration, sensory accessibility in any form should be required of theatres in order to be fully compliant. While there may be many different things that can be done in the vein of sensory accessibility, implementation and moving forward can require challenging of assumptions and looking to the future.

When theatres first approach sensory accessibility, they may come in with assumptions and misconceptions to challenge and overcome. One of the assumptions of creation and implementation is that sensory accessibility is not feasible. The basis of this assumption is the prominence of organizations such as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, colloquially known as the Kennedy Center, and Imagination Stage that are utilizing practically every adaptation for sensory accessibility; other organizations assume that in order to be sensory-friendly, they must undertake everything these organizations are doing. This, however, is not the case as there are many ways to be sensory accessible. The biased belief discounts the importance of the minor adaptations; as stated before, research has shown that minor adjustments to how a theatre performance operates can cause a more comfortable and familiar experience for audiences. The changes for sensory accessibility can be made independent of one another, so an organization can undertake whichever aspects fit best within the ability and current operations.

Choosing which undertakings to be more sensory accessible to pursue requires an understanding of how you want to incorporate sensory accessibility into the mission as well as what

is possible given the limitations of the organizational resources. There is a need to distinguish between what an organization would like to pursue or sees as the ideal and what is feasible. Often, the limitations fall under issues of funding, time, or personnel, and often these go hand in hand. These limitations only add to the hesitance of making any adaptations because of the fear an organization will not be doing enough by adding a worry that it will not be possible or worth it. However, organizations must adopt the philosophy that whatever changes they are making to be more sensory accessible are enough. With this, organizations should note that making simple changes requires virtually no additional resources, and it is only when the more involved changes are made that additional resources are often needed. While theatres may feel like the minor adaptations are not enough for sensory accessibility, the fact theatres are doing anything for audiences with sensory sensitivities is important.

Figuring out where to begin with sensory accessibility can be a daunting task for theatre companies. As with anything in the arts, we cannot operate within the bubble of our own companies, but rather we must consult with those on the outside and those who might be more knowledgeable than us. For sensory accessibility, there are many experts and those more experienced with the disability community. These experts include the families of those who we are catering our performances to and the disability community itself, special educators, and occupational therapists. These groups of people can all provide valuable insights into what best assists those with sensory sensitivities in daily life and leisure, allowing us to ensure that as arts organizations we can truly be doing what is best for our constituencies.

While each of these consulting groups could provide us a myriad of insights, they each also bring a unique perspective to sensory accessibility. People with disabilities and their families can provide a more personalized approach to programming that deals specifically with the social aspect of the experience. They can provide insights and feedback on specifically how the program was

executed in terms of if the accommodations were enough for each individual audience member. Because one of the goals for families is to have the experience act as a family experience where everyone can attend together, families can provide feedback on if the actions being taken are accomplishing that goal or if there is something else that could be done to make the experience more familiar, predictable, and comfortable. Those with disabilities and their families are unique in their positioning to sensory accessibility as they could easily participate in focus groups for theatres who either want to establish, evaluate, or expand their sensory accessibility programs.

Special educators, occupational therapists, and speech language pathologists can all provide insights into logistical concerns for the theatres. One of the principles with sensory accessibility is to create an environment in the theatre that contains similar elements to what one would find in a special education classroom or while communicating with an occupational therapist. For these professionals, there is a desire to ensure that sensory-friendly programs can provide social practice needed using classroom engagement strategies and other methodologies that are already familiar. They can assist by providing analysis of the current environment and suggesting what arts organizations should pursue given what they are already doing for sensory accessibility. Professionals in these fields as people who help in daily functioning can also act as the expert eyes on the pre-visit materials, ensuring that each sensitive moment is identified and explained to the extent necessary. In order to challenge the stereotypical perception of people with disabilities in society, these professionals can also assist in simply educating the public to bring awareness to the need behind providing these experiences and break down the hesitation associated with the lack of understanding.⁴⁸

The arts sector has created a number of resources for those starting out or expanding their offerings. Organizations such as the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Kennedy

⁴⁸ Ibid. Ideishi, pg. 5

Center have begun offering conferences with elements of accessibility and entirely addressing sensory accessibility. The prominence of these conferences in the field indicates the growing importance of sensory accessibility and growing acceptance of its necessity. For both those just beginning sensory accessibility and those with established programs, these conferences can provide useful insights into any new adaptations they may want to make and lay the groundwork for how to ensure organizational commitment to sensory accessibility. While many of the current accessibility checklists provided by the National Endowment for the Arts or Americans for the Arts do not currently provide any information on sensory accessibility measures, there is a necessity to add these to the checklists in a series of levels based on feasibility.

The Kennedy Center program for sensory accessibility is included within an element entitled the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) to provide information for other organizations that are pursuing programs themselves.⁴⁹ In particular, they released a document outlining their processes for sensory-friendly performances and steps they feel necessary to the process. The guide is broken down into sections based on the aspect of the program. In one section, the guide provides examples of individuals who may benefit from sensory accessibility and ways to recognize manifestations of sensory sensitivity. Another section outlines examples of people you can consult in creating sensory-friendly programs. They outline examples of what adaptations can be done for experiences to make them sensory accessible. Ways in which programs can be evaluated, as the Kennedy Center outlines, primarily involve communicating with those your sensory accessibility has served to get an idea of how audiences feel about the program. All this is pared down to a quick checklist for the reference of other organizations.⁵⁰ If ADA is to include such sensory disabilities, the arts have a duty to society to provide these experiences.

⁴⁹ "Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD®)," *The Kennedy Center*. Retrieved from <http://education.kennedy-center.org/education/accessibility/lead/conference.html>.

⁵⁰ "Sensory Friendly Programming for People with Social & Cognitive Disabilities: A Guide for Performing Arts Settings," *The Kennedy Center*. Spring 2013. Retrieved from <http://education.kennedy-center.org/education/accessibility/lead/SensoryGuidebook.pdf>.

As the disability community continues to be more prominent and desiring more opportunity to be visible and participatory in society and leisure activities, theatres will need to adapt to meet sensory accessibility and inclusion measures. The future of sensory accessibility requires that theatres fully recognize the needs and wants of their audiences of higher need. As these audiences grow and our knowledge of sensory sensitivities increases, more theatres will need to be adaptable to new inclusivity measures. While there is understandably a question of what will happen when all theatres have sensory-friendly programming, as this would create a scenario in which audiences with disabilities may have too many choices of performances, more theatres implementing sensory accessibility measures will serve to meet the demand for a diversity of opportunities.

Another consideration to be made when determining how to implement sensory-friendly performances in particular is the need to expand offerings beyond children's theatre. While in some cases, children's theatre may be an appropriate option for older audiences, this is not always the case. Because of the wide array of disabilities related to sensory sensitivities, some older audience members may desire to see something more mature or catered towards adults. In particular, the side of sensory accessibility related to disabilities such as dementia or PTSD are being ignored through some theatres only providing children's theatre options for sensory-friendly performances if they provide anything. Additionally, the current population of audiences at children's theatre sensory-friendly performances are aging and may soon have a demand for these same performances at a more mature level. In order to be proactive in ensuring the availability of these performances, theatres that have more mature offerings should consider the use of the same measures for children's theatre. Each adaptation made with children's theatre is transferable to more mature theatre and can be implemented in the same way.⁵¹

⁵¹ Umeda, Caroline J. et al. "Expanding the Implementation of the Americans With Disabilities Act for Populations With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: The Role of Organization-Level Occupational Therapy Consultation," SemanticScholar. Retrieved from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Expanding-the-Implementation-of-the-Americans-With-Umeda-Fogelberg/32ffac630ec599b05d3848e7afd7b21df624feb>.

As many organizations today are outlining their commitment to accessibility in their missions, all should address the role they would like sensory accessibility to play. Being inclusive towards audiences should be a value of organizations, as all arts organizations at least somewhat have the desire for their work to reach as many audience members as possible. Sensory accessibility should not only be seen as important to organizations, but it is a necessity under the current iteration of ADA.

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