

THINKING AND ACTING DIFFERENTLY, *for the Benefit of all*

By Eric Heidle

When Sarah Thornton, Patron Services Manager at the Missoula Children’s Theatre, hops onto our Zoom call to talk about sensory-friendly theatrical productions the subject is fresh in her mind. That’s because she’s come directly in from a hot September day, loading kids onto buses following two performances at the long-time Garden City institution, and she’s energized to talk about how it’s making theater productions accessible and enjoyable for every person in the crowd—and the cast.

Naomi Lichtenberg, the Theatre’s Foundations and Corporations Director, joins us on the call and the conversation really gets rolling. “We always say ‘theater is for everyone,’” she stresses, and what Naomi tells me next shows they mean it. “It all started in 2012 when a mom wrote then-executive director Michael McGill and said, is it possible for you to do a sensory-friendly version? Because my daughter is sensitive and she wouldn’t do well going to a “regular” performance. And Michael McGill said yes.”

That simple “yes” began a new tradition: adding performances with specific changes to make them a better experience for audience members on the autism spectrum. What changes, exactly? The Theatre’s house lights remain up and its doors stay open throughout each show, letting audience members move around freely or leave as needed. During these shows, making noise not only isn’t frowned upon, it’s expressly embraced. This lets audience members respond in their own way without risk of being discouraged by the usual expectation of quiet from the crowd.

The shows themselves get some vital tweaks as well. Sometimes content is edited to address difficult topics and performances may be shortened for a more comfortable running time. Loud sound effects and bright lights may be minimized, and a unique system helps audiences know when anything “big” is about to happen: a Children’s Theatre staffer armed with a glow stick stands to one side of the stage, and uses it to make signals which alert guests that major action, lighting effects, music, or noise are about to occur. This gives audience members time to be ready in a way that won’t be disrupting. Also, to help guests be comfortable with costumed performers, cast members will often appear before the show begins. “When we did Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” Naomi explains, **“we had the Abominable Snowman come out ahead of time and take off his head and show everyone it’s an actor. When he showed up in the play, no one was caught off guard.”**

Even these accommodations might not be enough for every visitor, so the Children’s Theatre has one more feature designed especially for those who find the crowd or



TOP CENTER: Eamon Graham as Christopher Boone and Jesse Ballard as Siobhan

LOWER LEFT: Molly Williams with Clover St. John (Rudolph in Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer)



LOWER RIGHT: The cozy corner provides a quiet spot away from the action.

Photos courtesy Missoula Children’s Theatre.

action too much. The cozy corner, located in the Theatre’s lobby, provides stuffed animals, books, blankets, a rocking chair, and a really cool fish pillow to give visitors a touch of home and safety. Naomi explains: “A dad and his kid came, and they didn’t even go in to the show. They played in the cozy corner the whole time. And afterwards, the dad came up and said, ‘This was *something*.’ He was comfortable in the theatre. He played, and the fact that it didn’t matter that he didn’t go in to the show...it was a victory.”

And audience members aren’t the only ones who benefit from these innovations. The Missoula Children’s Theatre facilitates casting for actors with disabilities as much as possible, with measures such as adapting choreography for those who use wheelchairs. More than that, the Theatre’s programming reflects this approach.

Sarah, who’s a professional actor herself, directed the Theatre’s recent production of “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time”, based on Mark Haddon’s novel of a teen boy attempting to solve a crime. “He’s never officially given a diagnosis,” Sarah says, “but quite clearly is someone who is on the spectrum, telling the story of how he’s going to solve the mystery of who killed the neighbor’s dog. So the story itself, I think, is quite important to tell. But we also had several of our cast members who are autistic or on the spectrum, or were parents or family members of someone on the spectrum. So it was a subject matter that was really, really important to everybody involved.” The production also asked Missoula occupational therapist Laura Olsonoski to work with the cast to strengthen their understanding of neurodivergence. “She was very generous with her time,” Sarah remarks, “having a conversation about the many, many, many variations that people can experience of this, and how to be respectful and truthful in our storytelling.”

Finally, the lead role of Christopher was played by two actors, each who never left the stage during their performances. From Sarah: “It’s a huge load for an adult actor. To have two 14- and 15-year-olds playing this role... they were just endlessly impressive. But one of them was on the spectrum himself. So it was an interesting thing to see the two performances and how they interpreted it. As Laura said, and as we kind of adopted as the cast mantra, if you’ve met one person on the spectrum, you’ve met one person on the spectrum.”

Doing all this takes additional effort, and money. One sensory-friendly performance at the Theatre costs approximately \$8,000 to stage, and that number becomes a bit bigger when you learn that the Theatre decided two years ago to make admission to sensory-friendly performances free to all. Funding through a Cultural and Aesthetic grant from the Montana Arts Council helps offset the cost, as do generous donations from supporters in the community. All of this work has helped expand access for and inclusion of neurodiverse children and adults in its programs for more than a decade, and it’s proven that we seldom break new ground without breaking down barriers. Thinking creatively means thinking differently. And for this capable theatre tucked into the edge of the Garden City’s downtown, and the work of its talented staff, cast and crew, thinking differently has firmly taken center stage.

The Theatre’s next sensory-friendly performance will be Annie, on December 17. For tickets and to learn more about the Missoula Children’s Theatre and its programs, visit <https://www.mctinc.org>

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