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Photos by Emon Hassan

## Showtime on the Spectrum

For audiences with autism, Broadway's grandest theaters stage musicals to last a lifetime.

By W.M. Akers

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**A**t a matinee of the Broadway show “Elf” on January 5, the audience was oddly restless. When the curtain rose, revealing a rosy-cheeked Wayne Knight wearing a white-and-red suit, a girl screamed, “Hi Santa!” followed by a boy’s cry of “Quiet!” During the first dance number, as a line of elves popped off tiny little kicks, a child ran down the aisle and pelted a squishy toy at one of the dancers. Without missing a step, the elf made a one-handed catch. Throughout the first act, the audience grew increasingly noisy, but the actors, impressively, remained locked-in.

“There’s no sound like a theater full of autistic people,” says leading elf Jordan Gelber. “It was non-stop, except when there was music or a song. Then it was like all the sounds died away.”



This audience, made up entirely of people on the autism spectrum and their families, was there because of the Theatre Development Fund, a sprawling charity whose Autism Theatre Initiative has been producing afternoons like this since 2011. Several times a year, TDF turns a normally staid Broadway house into an autistic child’s paradise. Once you get used to the noise, you realize this is the happiest Broadway audience you’ve ever seen.

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**T**he project is the brainchild of Lisa Carling, director of accessibility programs at TDF, whose goal is to open Broadway up to what she calls “a neglected audience.”

“It’s not okay anymore for families with a child or adult on the autism spectrum to stay home,” she says, “to not

be able to go see a Broadway show like any other family.”

Before the matinee, Carling stood in the back of the theater, her striking gray hair making her easy to find. She said she was nervous, but that everything was going according to plan. Dozens of volunteers roamed the space, helping families get their discounted tickets, buy concessions, and navigate the cramped Hirschfeld Theatre lobby—an experience that can be overwhelming even for people not prone to sensory overload.



Upstairs, the bar was closed—a concession from the theater’s ownership, which allowed TDF to set up an activity space where restless audience members could burn off excess energy. There were also coloring books, noisemakers, and a huge reserve of the squishy balls known as “fidgets,” which volunteers handed out to anyone who asked.

“We try to get them back at the end of the show,” said volunteer Trish Mahalko. “Sometimes they walk, and that’s okay.”

Across the mezzanine, along a walkway lined with Al Hirschfeld’s striking pen-and-ink caricatures of forgotten productions like “Jacobowsky and the Colonel” and “St. Louis Woman,” the house manager’s office had been converted into a quiet area—a place for the over-stimulated to listen to classical music, put in earplugs, or lie down under a heavy lead blanket.

Inside the theater, a 1920’s-era Arabian palace on Manhattan’s West Forty-Fifth Street, there was a buzz usually absent from a Saturday matinee. The crowd found its seats. The lights dimmed. The audience cheered. “Elf” was about to begin.

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**T**he preparation for an autism-friendly matinee goes far beyond fidgets. TDF spent just over \$117,000 to buy out the 1,424-seat theater, then resold the tickets at prices ranging from thirty-five to fifty-percent less than face value, a discount that Carling calls “crucial.”

This was the first ever Broadway show for many in the audience. To ready them for the experience, TDF collaborated with a group called [Autism Friendly Spaces](#), which specializes in a technique called “social stories”—a standard teaching tool that combines words and pictures to explain new concepts to people who have trouble learning verbally. The social stories cover a range of issues that might crop up during an afternoon in the theater district, including navigating crowded spaces, dealing with unfamiliar theatrical sights and sounds, and understanding that, although the story of “Elf” is the same as the motion picture, they will not be seeing Will Ferrell.



*Behind the scenes at the TDF/"Elf" show. (Video by Emon Hassan)*

“We try to focus on prevention strategies as much as possible,” says Jamie Bleiweiss, co-founder of Autism Friendly Spaces. “Preparing the audience ahead of time—before they come to the show—is the most important part.”

Based on the recommendations of Bleiweiss and other experts, TDF requested a few changes from “Elf”’s producers. The house lights were not completely dimmed. The actor’s microphones were turned down slightly. Volunteers at the front of the house used glow sticks to warn parents of anything that might be startling. Anything that could not be changed was incorporated into the preparatory materials given to the parents. For their next autism friendly performance, an April matinee of “Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark,” TDF asked that the villain Arachne hang herself by the waist instead of the neck. The producers refused, so a warning about the staged suicide will be included in the materials sent to parents before the show.

“That’s fine,” says Carling. “It’s a negotiation.”

Though nothing unusual was required of “Elf”’s actors, they were warned that the audience might appear restless, even if they were rapt. Don’t let it get to you, they were told. Just tell your story.

“Our underlying philosophy is, we don’t compromise the integrity of their performance,” says Bleiweiss. “Ever.”

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**E** “If” was TDF’s fourth autism-friendly matinee, after “Mary Poppins” and two performances of “The Lion King” in 2011 and 2012. Last year, Micah Hollingworth of Jujamcyn Theaters, owners of the Hirschfeld, contacted TDF after taking his son, who is on the autism spectrum, to one of the “Lion King” shows.

His son resisted his first trip to the theater, but Hollingworth and his wife—who also works in the industry—insisted, eager for a way to teach their child about their work.



“Quiet Room” set up for children

“The entire time there, he was clearly anxiety-ridden,” Hollingworth remembers. “And then the volunteers started interacting with us. They had the picture story. They had the fidgets and other things that he had a familiarity with, and he was able to participate and watch the entire show. He had a great time.”

His fear of theater eased, Hollingworth’s son has since been able to enjoy an ordinary Broadway performance. Hollingworth’s hope is that, after one or two autism-friendly performances, other people on the spectrum will be able to make the same transition. For him, the highlight of the “Elf” matinee was seeing parents let their guard down.

“They don’t get this opportunity often, right?” he explains. “You see people come in and sit down, and their shoulders drop. They exhale for a moment. We’re in our seats, we’re gonna see our show, this is great. That’s really magical.”

“This job is show business,” Hollingworth continues, “and sometimes in the role I’m in, it feels like more business than show. For one afternoon, in this setting, I could honestly say to myself that what I did mattered, and will matter for these families for some time to come.”

\* \* \*

**F**or a long-running show, an autism-friendly performance is irresistible. It guarantees a full house, positive press, and an audience eager to spend money on souvenirs. For actors who have been in a role for some time, the energy boost can be invaluable.

Before the curtain rose on “Elf,” Beth Leavel, the actress playing the stepmother to Jordan Gelber’s Buddy, did her make-up in her dressing room on the third floor of the Hirschfeld.



Lisa Carling, Director of TDF Accessibility Programs

“We’ve been doing this show for a while,” said Leavel. “It’s nice to have an audience that may make us think a little differently. That’s great for an actor. It’s kind of a little energy gift for us.”

After each performance, TDF sends out surveys to the audience, the responses to which have given Lisa Carling a trove of stories that could bring a tear to the eye of even the most cynical Broadway veteran. After “The Lion King,” she heard from a mother whose autistic son “does not usually show affection.” During the performance, he held his sister’s hand for the first time. At the same show, there was “a little boy who doesn’t relate to anything, doesn’t want to be hugged, doesn’t hug toys, doesn’t want to be touched in any way,” said Carling. Quickly overwhelmed, he and his mother left shortly into Act I, taking a stuffed-animal Simba as a souvenir. On the train ride home, the boy wouldn’t let go of his new toy.

“And then there was a child, non-verbal, putting a blanket over his shoulders at home after the show,” Carling recalls, “saying over and over, ‘I’m the Lion King! I’m the Lion King!’ Again, the parent had tears in his eyes when he wrote to us.”

\* \* \*



Kiertan Khichi and dad Sam in the activity area

After intermission at “Elf,” not everyone returned to the theater for the second act. In the activity area, Sam Khichi sat with his young son Kiertan, waiting for the rest of their family to finish the play. Kiertan played with a pinscreen while Khichi explained that, though his son usually has trouble sitting still, he made it through more than an hour of “Elf” before getting too restless to continue.

“I think with him, it’s probably hard to follow the story, but I think he likes the lights and the sounds and being able to move,” Khichi said. “He likes the Christmas trees, the elves, and Santa. It’s his first play. Even kids with special needs love Santa.”

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