

THE CENTER FOR
**APPLIED DRAMA
AND AUTISM**



THEATRE
ON THE SPECTRUM

What we advocate for: Inclusion and Accessibility for Performers With Autism/Disabilities

Many performing arts groups and venues are jumping on board the inclusion movement by providing special performances for audience members with disabilities. For example, lighting, sound, and special effects are toned down to accommodate people with autism. Sign language interpreters and captioning devices assist

deaf people, while large type or Braille programs, and audio descriptions on headphones can provide a deeper understanding of what is happening on stage for those with vision challenges.

Theatre on the Spectrum is the performance wing of The Center for Applied Drama and Autism, a 5013c located in Akron OH. a theatre company for adults with disabilities. Our company members span the spectrum of abilities: we have people in wheelchairs, with cognitive disabilities, and those on the autism spectrum. Our actors have in common a desire to perform and entertain. They also share in common frustration with the lack of both opportunity and accessible performance spaces that are essential to bringing about inclusion in the performing arts.

Lack of Opportunity

While we see some great strides being taken to include performers with disabilities (Ali Stroker winning a Tony award for her groundbreaking performance in Oklahoma on Broadway), too often producers and directors do not reach out to include performers with disabilities in roles that any actor could play, regardless of ability. Just because a script does not specify that the character has a disability, does not mean that a person in a wheelchair, for example, shouldn't be considered for the part of a family member, teacher, doctor, community organizer and so on.

Opportunities should be created -- not left to happenstance. Performing arts companies can reach out to local service providers to offer classes in acting, singing or dancing. They will be surprised by the amount of unrecognized talent is available and interested in performance opportunities.

Actors with disabilities can be brought along by offering ensemble/super-numerary roles to gain experience.

Accessible Performance Spaces

Here are some questions we always ask when invited to perform in someone else's space:

1. Is there access from drop off to the stage? Are there adequate handicapped parking spaces? Is the load-in zone safe and accessible for actors and crew with disabilities? Many of our performers cannot navigate stairs. Even one step from sidewalk to entrance door can prevent an actor in a wheelchair from entering the venue.
2. Can performers access the stage from the house and the wings without going up steps? Some theatres have chair lifts that provide access.
3. Are there accessible restrooms for performers that are located close to the stage? Some performers will need to use the restroom right before they perform, or may have to leave the stage to use the restroom.
4. Are your restrooms really accessible? Just because you have grab bars installed does not make your restroom accessible for a person in a power wheelchair and their aide. Restroom stalls must have enough room for both the wheelchair to navigate and to include a personal care provider as needed.
5. Are your Green rooms and/or dressing rooms accessible for actors with mobility issues? If dressing rooms are on another floor, they must be accessible via an elevator.
6. Do you have ramps available to accommodate actors in wheelchairs on stage as well as off? Note that designers should be aware of performers in wheelchairs so that they can design a set that allows the actor to make safe entrances and exits as well as including them within the stage settings.

7. Will the sound system cover our actors' needs? Do you have enough lavalier microphones for each of our actors? Amplification is an essential aspect for many people with disabilities.

8. Can the venue offer stage lighting that provides a general wash without bright glaring lights that limit the performers' abilities to move and see while on stage.

In conclusion, we encourage all performing arts venues and decision-makers to take the time to do an accessibility audit and make those upgrades which create inclusive and accessible spaces for people of all abilities. For more information on how to improve accessibility, you can contact the Kennedy Center's LEAD (Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability).