A relaxed performance is aimed at opening up theatre experiences for people with autism and other learning disabilities.

Evaluation

"Families like ours are usually swimming against the tide."

Today, we were the Tide"
Relaxed Performance Project
Evaluation Report 2012/13

Susan Potter
August 2013
Contacts

Kirsty Hoyle, Relaxed Performance Project Manager
Society of London Theatre
32 Rose Street
London WC2E 9ET

Tel: 020 7557 6700
Email: kirsty@solttma.co.uk
Website: www.solt.co.uk

Ruth Smith, Project Coordinator
The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts
Unit 6.08-6.09 The Tea Building
56 Shoreditch High Street
London E1 6JJ

Tel: 020 3326 2230
Email: ruth.smith@childrenandarts.org.uk
Website: www.childrenandarts.org.uk

Susan Potter, External Evaluator
Arts Evaluation and Research
35 Sturton Street
Cambridge CB1 2QG

Tel: 01223 729442
Email: susan.potter42@ntlworld.com

Front cover images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The Relaxed Performance Project Partnership</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Evaluation methodology</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Inputs and outputs</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Quantitative findings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Description of venues and programme</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Financial structure of performances</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Marketing and proportion of tickets sold</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Composition of audiences</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Qualitative findings</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Audience Members</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.1 Access to theatre and live performance</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.2 Increased confidence and self-esteem</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.3 Enjoyment, inspiration and motivation</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2   Theatres</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1 Development of new, increased and diverse audiences</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2 Skills sharing and professional support</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3 A shared ambition for access and inclusion</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7     Learning outcomes</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1   Programming</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2   Publicity and promotion</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3   Professional development opportunities</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4   Supporting individual needs</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5   Providing a model of best practice</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8     Conclusions</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9     References and bibliography</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10    List of images</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

- The Relaxed Performance Project is a new national initiative designed by The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts, The Society of London Theatre and The Theatrical Management Association (SOLT/TMA). Generously supported in 2012/13 by the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation, the Relaxed Performance Project aimed to encourage children with an autism spectrum condition, learning disability or sensory/communication disorder and their families to engage with live performance and theatre.

- Many families living with autism, learning disabilities, sensory and communication needs may be wary of visiting the theatre for fear of disrupting the performance and/or other audience members. Relaxed Performances are a positive way to offer families the chance to experience theatre together. In a Relaxed Performance, children and young people benefit from a relaxed environment, since the performance is adjusted to reduce anxiety or stress.

- In a Relaxed Performance, changes may be made to levels of sound and lighting in order to eliminate surprise and lessen their impacts. There is a relaxed attitude to noise and moving around the auditorium during the performance, with designated ‘chill-out’ areas for audience members to use, should being in the auditorium become overwhelming.

- The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 engaged the support and advocacy of eight diverse performance venues across the UK (e.g. Grimsby Auditorium; Oxford Playhouse; Shakespeare’s Globe; Theatre by the Lake; Unicorn), ensuring the successful delivery of the project.

- In preparation for the smooth delivery of the programme, the project provided 24 autism-specific professional development sessions, attended by 300 theatre staff including e.g. executive management teams, performers, technical staff, front of house staff, marketing staff and volunteers.

- In supporting the publicity and promotion of the programme, the project engaged and collaborated with a diverse range of partner organisations across the UK and beyond including e.g. National Autistic Society; Children’s and Social Services; MENCAP; Theatre Development Fund, Broadway, USA.
The programme enabled 4,983 children, young people and wider family members to attend a vibrant programme of high quality live performances across the UK (e.g. 1001 Nights; Spot’s Birthday Party; The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time; The Mouse and His Child; The Railway Children).

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 resulted in numerous positive outcomes for the larger majority of stakeholders: audience members, partner venues, The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts and SOLT/TMA. Positive outcomes for children and families described in this evaluation include: access to theatre and live performance; increased confidence and self-esteem; enjoyment, inspiration and motivation. Positive outcomes for participant theatres meanwhile include: development of new, increased and diverse audiences; skills sharing and professional support; a shared ambition for access and inclusion.

The Relaxed Performance Project produced and disseminated eight autism-friendly ‘Relaxed Performance Visual Guides’ in order to support audience members prior to their theatre visit. In addition, the project produced and disseminated a suite of Relaxed Performance press releases and leaflets resulting in 15 media items (e.g. The Guardian, Radio 4, The Social Issue, The Stage). The project developed a dedicated social media campaign (Facebook), resulting in 450 responses from December 2012 to August 2013.

The project has developed a model of best practice for dissemination at both a national and international level, in order to share its learning outcomes with audience members and theatres across the UK and beyond. Importantly, the Relaxed Performance Project provides a new example of how theatres - and their programmes - might impact upon those critical social issues of access, inclusion, tolerance and understanding.

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 achieved the aims and objectives established at the outset. The successes of this pilot phase have undoubtedly been due to the shared vision, energy and commitment of the Relaxed Performance Project Team, as managed by Kirsty Hoyle (SOLT/TMA) and coordinated by Ruth Smith (Children & the Arts), with support from the eight performance venues.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the support of Kirsty Hoyle, Ruth Smith and all members of the Relaxed Performance Project Team in the preparation of this report. I would also like to acknowledge the generous time and cooperation given by the many Relaxed Performance audience members, theatre staff, partner organisations and all others who have contributed to this evaluation.

The Relaxed Performance Project would not have been possible without the efforts of:

Kirsty Hoyle, Relaxed Performance Project Manager
The Society of London Theatre and Theatrical Management Association

Ruth Smith, Project Coordinator
The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts

Lucinda Harvey, Head of Employment Relations
The Society of London Theatre and Theatrical Management Association

Jeremy Newton, Chief Executive
The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts

Becky Schutt
Strategy Consultant, Arts and Culture

Marcus Stanton, Press and PR Adviser
The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts

Karen Townsend, Head of Access & Learning
Ambassador Theatre Group
1 The Relaxed Performance Project Partnership

There is widespread consensus that engagement in the arts affects and changes lives. Culture and the arts play an important part in the health and vitality of communities, creating vibrant and attractive places for people to live and work, bringing pleasure and enjoyment. In addition, the arts are evidenced to strengthen social bonds. The arts teach us about the present and the past through dance, drama, literature, music and visual art; they cut across differences in culture, educational background and ability, bringing every subject to life and turning abstractions into concrete reality.

However, many young people continue to leave school having never visited an art gallery or museum, watched a performance in a theatre or listened to an orchestra play live. The Relaxed Performance Project Partners seek to redress this balance, inspiring children and their families to engage directly with both the arts and arts professionals. Supported by generous funding from the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation, the Relaxed Performance Project is a new collaboration between The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts, The Society of London Theatre and The Theatrical Management Association (SOLT/TMA) aiming to encourage children, young people and their families living with autism to engage with theatre and live performance.

Founded by Nancy Lurie Marks over 25 years ago, the Nancy Lurie Marks (NLM) Family Foundation aims to help people with autism to lead fulfilling and rewarding lives. The Foundation is committed to understanding autism from a scientific perspective, increasing opportunities available to the autism community and educating the public about autism. In pursuit of its mission, the NLM Foundation provides grants to programmes in clinical care, policy, advocacy and education. It funds peer-reviewed research, the development of collaborative investigator projects and

---

fellowship programmes. Through sponsorship of scientific conferences, symposia and workshops, the Foundation seeks to encourage innovation and provide a springboard to generate new avenues of shared inquiry.

Established in 1908 by Sir Charles Wyndham, The Society of London Theatre (SOLT) represents the producers, owners and managers of the major commercial and grant-aided theatres in central London. SOLT combines its long-standing roles in industrial relations and legal advice for members alongside a campaigning role for the industry, while delivering a range of audience development programmes, promoting theatre going to adults and children alike. The Theatre Management Association (TMA) is the UK’s major business organisation providing professional support for the performing arts in the UK. TMA members include theatres, multi-purpose venues, arts centres, concert halls, commercial producers, touring theatre, opera and ballet companies, sole traders and suppliers to the performing arts. TMA advocates on behalf of its members to champion the value of investment in the performing arts, representing the interests of members at local, national and international level. In addition, TMA promotes an extensive programme of conferences, training and networking events for those working in the performing arts. Each year the TMA holds Theatre Awards UK, the premier ceremony celebrating theatre throughout the UK.

The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts was established in 2006, as an educational charity committed to helping children and young people experience the arts through high quality creative programmes. Children & the Arts understands that arts and cultural activities have the power to transform lives and have a proven positive impact on children and young people’s educational, social and emotional development. Importantly, Children & the Arts recognises that participation in the arts has impacts upon both educational attainment and achievement, as endorsed by numerous research studies over recent years. Together and independently, the Relaxed Performance Project Partners are striving to provide greater opportunities for all children to access live theatre and performance art - in innovative and creative ways - and more specifically for those young people who might otherwise be excluded from such activity.

“We believe that every child should have the opportunity to enjoy and be inspired by the arts, but unfortunately many children with autism have faced an unfair barrier to access. This project is about making the theatre welcoming and inclusive for these children and young adults. We already cater for disabilities through audio-described, captioned and signed performances so why not relaxed performances too?”

Jeremy Newton, The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts

---

2 See bibliography for further details of research and evaluation studies
2 The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13

In the UK, there is widespread acceptance that equality and diversity in the arts is of benefit to all art lovers and society more broadly. Diversity is intrinsic to art, arts practice and culture, yet this viewpoint is often obscured to the detriment of us all. Research indicates that individuals with a disability or illness have significantly lower rates of arts attendance or participation than those without disability or illness. In addition, family members of children and young people with a disability or illness are less likely to take part in arts and cultural activities. Furthermore, these non-participants are most likely to be from a Black and minority ethnic group and more likely than any other age group to be in poor health.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, in that while all people with autism share certain areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in different ways. There are approximately 700,000 people in the UK with autism, which equates to more than one in 100. If family members are included, autism touches the lives of 2.7 million people across the country every day. Without relevant support and understanding, autism has been evidenced to have a profound - and sometimes devastating - effect on individuals and families.

A deficit model has largely dominated most professional and academic discourse on autism over the last century. This model presents autistic people as individuals severely limited by a disordered neurology that causes major impairments in their cognition and ability to interact with the surrounding social and physical world. However, this deficit-focused view of people with autism has largely ignored their cognitive strengths, their diverse ways of being, their gifts and talents. Many studies of autism present a limited or token discussion of the assets of people with autism, or they exclude them entirely. Very few studies present autism as a form of human difference akin to other societal forms of diversity (e.g. ethnicity, nationality, gender). The Relaxed Performance Project aims to address at least some of these inequalities.

Many families living with autism, learning disabilities, sensory and communication needs are wary of visiting the theatre for fear of disrupting the performance and/or other audience members. Relaxed Performances are a positive way to offer families the chance to experience theatre together. In a Relaxed Performance, young people benefit from a relaxed environment, since the performance is adjusted to reduce anxiety or stress. Changes may be made to levels of sound and lighting in order to eliminate surprise and lessen their impacts. There is a relaxed attitude to noise and moving around the auditorium during the performance, with designated ‘chill-out’ areas for audience members to use, should being in the auditorium become overwhelming.

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 is an important step in reaching out to families who until now have felt excluded from live performances. Delivered by SOLT/TMA in collaboration with Children & the Arts, the project began with eight theatres across the UK, with the aspiration for many more organisations to participate in the future. The project aims to develop a model of best practice for dissemination at a national and international level, in order to share its learning outcomes with audience members and theatres across the UK and beyond. Importantly, the Relaxed Performance Project provides an example of how theatres - and their programmes - might impact upon those critical social issues of inclusion, tolerance and understanding.

“We’ve come from Reading today. We’ve come to see the autism friendly version of this production because I have Asperger’s. I’ve read the book and it’s really good! I’m very excited about it! I don’t go to the theatre too, too much; I think the last time I went was about two months ago. We went to see ‘The Lion King’. That was really good, it was brilliant! It was just the sets and the actors, it was also my first time there of course! It’s fantastic what the theatres have done for kids like me, yes, great job! “

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

---

3 Evaluation methodology

Susan Potter was appointed as external evaluator to the Relaxed Performance Project in December 2012. Through consultation with the project team, an evaluation methodology was proposed, including both quantitative and qualitative measures. The evaluation aims to:

- Examine the processes, outcomes and impacts for both individuals and organisations participating in the Relaxed Performance Project
- Measure the successes of the Relaxed Performance Project against the prescribed aims and objectives established at the outset
- Draw out any general lessons for effective practices to support the further development and sustainability of the project.

Data for analysis was collected between January to August 2013 via the following means, in order to document and evaluate the processes, outcomes and impacts of the project:

- Planning meetings with Relaxed Performance project team to establish aims and objectives of the external evaluation
- Desk research pertaining to: audience members, venues and programme partners
- 4 formative site visits, documenting Relaxed Performance Project performances (i.e. 1001 Nights; Romeo and Juliet; The Lion King; The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time)
- 78 audio recorded and transcribed interviews with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. audience members; performers; theatre staff; partner organisations)
- Quantitative data collected via Project Manager from partner performance venues
- Planning meeting with project team to develop format and content of evaluation
- Transcription, coding and analysis of all quantitative and qualitative data, resulting in full written report and presentation.

Important themes have been analysed, compared and contrasted from each set of data, in order to develop meaning and illuminate the findings. It is hoped that this method follows on logically from the objectives, to provide a robust and holistic evaluation to support the further development of the Relaxed Performance Project in 2013 and beyond.
4 Inputs and outputs

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 resulted in the following inputs and outputs:

- Engagement and collaboration with eight high profile performance venues across the UK
  
  Apollo Theatre, London
  Grimsby Auditorium, Grimsby
  Lyceum Theatre, London
  Oxford Playhouse, Oxford
  Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon
  Shakespeare’s Globe, London
  Theatre by the Lake, Keswick
  Unicorn Theatre, London

- Engagement and collaboration with numerous, diverse partner organisations across the UK and beyond including e.g. National Autistic Society; Children’s and Social Services; MENCAP; Theatre Development Fund, Broadway, USA

- Delivery of eight Relaxed Performances, attended by 4,983 children and adults

- Delivery of 24 autism-specific training sessions, attended by 300 theatre staff including e.g. executive management teams, performers, technical staff, front of house staff, marketing staff and volunteers

- Production and dissemination of eight autism friendly ‘Relaxed Performance Visual Guides’ in support of audience members; production and dissemination of Relaxed Performance press releases resulting in 15 media items (e.g. The Guardian, Radio 4, The Social Issue, The Stage)

- More than £14,000 financial support generated by the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 through external grants (Arts Council England and Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation) and substantial in-kind funding (Relaxed Performance venues and partner organisations).
5  Quantitative findings

The Relaxed Performance Project took place from November 2012 to June 2013. In the quantitative study, on-line surveys were delivered to audience members - via the theatres - after the performance. Data pertaining to the financial structures and composition of audiences were collected by the Relaxed Performance Project Manager, on conclusion of the pilot programme. In the qualitative study, interviews were held with audience members and other stakeholders at four diverse performances during the programme (i.e. 1001 Nights; Romeo and Juliet; The Lion King; The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time), to explore their experiences of the project and its outcomes. Findings resulting from the quantitative data are presented as follows:

- Description of venues and programme
- Financial structure of performances
- Marketing and proportion of tickets sold
- Composition of audiences.

5.1 Description of venues and programme

Theatres from across the UK were invited to take part in the Relaxed Performance Project via SOLT/TMA in 2012. The Relaxed Performance Project Manager subsequently engaged the support and advocacy of eight partner performance venues. These ranged from small, subsidised theatres (e.g. Oxford Playhouse), medium sized regional theatres (e.g. Theatre by the Lake), to larger commercial theatres (e.g. Grimsby Auditorium) all of which brought richness and diversity to the project and its outcomes. Of those eight theatres who took part in the Relaxed Performance Project, only two had previously delivered a Relaxed Performance or autism-friendly performance, while for six organisations this was the first time of working with this audience.

As described in Table 5.1, the programme included productions appropriate for a range of ages - from pre-school children to young adults - in order to engage with the widest potential audience. The eight Relaxed Performances took place across the country and throughout the year, from November 2012 to June 2013. The majority were delivered at the weekend and/or during school holiday periods, once again to attract the largest possible number of audience members.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue and location</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
<th>Relaxed Performance</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apollo Theatre, London</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</td>
<td>11+</td>
<td>2h 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grimsby Auditorium, Grimsby</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>Cinderella</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>2h 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyceum Theatre, London</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>The Lion King</td>
<td>7+</td>
<td>2h 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Playhouse, Oxford</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Spot’s Birthday Party</td>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>60 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon</td>
<td>1,040</td>
<td>The Mouse and His Child</td>
<td>8+</td>
<td>2h 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakespeare’s Globe, London</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
<td>11+</td>
<td>2h 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre by the Lake, Keswick</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>The Railway Children</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>2h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unicorn Theatre, London</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>1001 Nights</td>
<td>6+</td>
<td>60 mins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 Financial structure of performances

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 aimed to encourage families living with autism to engage with the programmes of eight participant theatres across the UK. The project aspired to make theatre more accessible for those with limited means. As described in Table 5.2, theatres provided affordable ticketing to Relaxed Performance audience members - often with substantial reductions - as compared with their usual pricing structures.

In addition, participant theatres reported employing several additional staff members and/or volunteers to ensure the smooth and successful delivery of the Relaxed Performance. These costs clearly differed from theatre to theatre, yet for all partners the Relaxed Performance Project was evidenced to generate considerable amounts of in-kind support and this is worthy of note.

Table 5.2 Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13: Ticket Prices and % Reduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue and location</th>
<th>Ticket Price</th>
<th>% Reduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apollo Theatre, London</td>
<td>£25 adult / £25 child</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grimsby Auditorium, Grimsby</td>
<td>£10 adult / £10 child</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyceum Theatre, London</td>
<td>£39.50 stalls / £25 circle</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Playhouse, Oxford</td>
<td>£11 adult / £9 child</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon</td>
<td>£10 adult / £5 child</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakespeare’s Globe, London</td>
<td>Free*</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre by the Lake, Keswick</td>
<td>£10 adult / £5 child</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unicorn Theatre, London</td>
<td>£8 adult / £8 child</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This performance was part of the ‘Playing Shakespeare’ programme, funded by Deutsche Bank
5.3 Marketing and proportion of tickets sold

Marketing of the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 was completed at a local level by the individual participant theatres, while wider networks (e.g. National Autistic Society; MENCAP; Children’s and Social Services; Theatre Development Fund, Broadway, USA) were used to publicise the project at a national and even international level, via SOLT/TMA and Children & the Arts. Bookings were once again completed through individual theatres, at which point a Relaxed Performance ‘Visual Guide’ was sent to those audience members with autism, in order to prepare them for their visit and the production. In terms of ticket sales for the Relaxed Performance Project, these once again differed from theatre to theatre.

As described in Figure 5.1, the largest majority of tickets sold were for ‘The Lion King’ at The Lyceum, London with 87% of seats filled. This was closely followed by ‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time’ at The Apollo Theatre (79%) and ‘1001 Nights’ at The Unicorn (63%). However, it should be noted that these calculations are based upon maximum capacity for all partner venues. Several theatres reduced seating capacity for the Relaxed Performance, in order to provide a more intimate experience for audience members. Although certain theatres may be seen to have engaged with lesser numbers, the response from audiences remained consistently positive across the programme.

Figure 5.1 Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13: proportion of tickets sold

![Graph showing proportion of tickets sold for different productions.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Proportion of Tickets Sold (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Lion King</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001 Nights</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinderella</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spot's Birthday Party</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mouse and His Child</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Railway Children</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

relaxed performance project programme
5.4 Composition of audiences

From November 2012 to June 2013, the Relaxed Performance Project engaged with a total of 4,983 audience members at eight theatres across the UK. As described in Figure 5.2, this total audience comprised 42% families living with autism, 33% community groups (e.g. autism support organisations; SEN schools) and 25% others (e.g. individuals and families). Of those audience members interviewed during and/or surveyed after a Relaxed Performance, 60% reported they had never been to the theatre before as a family, 30% had never been to the theatre and 90% had never been to a Relaxed Performance. However, it should be noted that there were inconsistencies across venues in terms of data collection, resulting in an approximation of the Relaxed Performance audience composition from certain participant theatres.

Figure 5.2 Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13: composition of audiences
6 Qualitative findings

A grounded approach was adopted for the analysis of qualitative data, which allowed themes to emerge through an inductive process, rather than testing for a hypothesis or searching for predetermined theories. The aim was to prioritise the ‘lived experience’ of audience members and programme deliverers, while also exploring the aims and objectives of the project. The preliminary coding process involved reading and re-reading the data, then labelling quotations and sections according to their content. This open coding was followed by thematic analysis to identify key themes and/or link themes together. The criteria for identifying themes were according to their prevalence across the interview data and relevance to the evaluation (i.e. impacts upon audience members and theatres; similar and/or comparable outcomes for participants; other factors which might be attributed to participating in and/or delivering the Relaxed Performance Project).

6.1 Audience members

Evaluation data collected from all sources (observation and visual documentation, on-site interviews, evaluation questionnaires) reflected an overwhelmingly positive response to the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13. Venues and their staff were described as ‘welcoming’, ‘friendly’ and ‘helpful’, while performances were described as ‘brilliant’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘wonderful’. An analysis of evaluation data revealed that the most significant outcomes for audience members were as follows:

- Access to theatre and live performance
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Enjoyment, inspiration and motivation.
6.1.1 Access to theatre and live performance

As previously described, many families living with autism, learning disabilities, sensory and communication needs are wary of visiting the theatre for fear of disrupting the performance and/or other audience members. The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 was evidenced to provide an important means for reaching out to families who until now have felt excluded from theatre and live performance. Individuals living with autism may find new settings or situations challenging to cope with. To prepare for this new experience, audience members were therefore sent a Relaxed Performance ‘Visual Guide’ to allay preceding anxieties. These were greatly appreciated by those families interviewed, who attested to their value in providing reassurance and support to those children and young people with autism.

“It’s made a real difference coming to the autism friendly versions, because they send you lots of information to prepare you. The visual guide that we were sent for here, in preparation for what is going on today, was absolutely fantastic. I actually contacted our local autistic society to let them know how good it all is. I explained that we didn’t even have to print off the visual guide, it was sent to us in the post! We know exactly where we’re going, what we’re doing. Obviously, the reassurance regarding the story line, especially the part about the dog at the beginning, that was really helpful in preparing us for the shock of it!”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Throughout the evaluation data, audience members described the importance of having access to ‘real’, ‘live’ and ‘high quality’ shows and performance venues. For those children and young people with autism who had never entered a theatre before, even the experience of a Relaxed Performance was demanding, for themselves and their parents. However, enabling families to take their first ‘safe steps’ into the theatre with their child and/or children via a Relaxed Performance was evidenced to provide the stimulus for encouraging further visits to this or other theatres.

“I really enjoyed it! It’s such a pleasure for them to see real theatre. It’s a shame that, because of Joshua, I couldn’t watch the full show, but we did see some of it. This is the first time that he is in any kind of auditorium, this is the very first time. He did actually calm down a little bit as the show went on, which I was very pleased about. So I think that the next time, he will know what to expect and not be so upset. I think gradually it will help him to focus a little bit more on the story, but this was a really good start. I’m really pleased! I have never taken him to any theatre before, but I think we will do this again.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
In addition to sending a Relaxed Performance ‘Visual Guide’ to each family prior to the performance, autism-specific training was delivered to staff of all partner venues. Each theatre participating in the Relaxed Performance Project adjusted light and sound levels during the performance to suit the needs of the audience, while designated ‘chill-out’ areas were prepared for audience members to use should being in the auditorium become overwhelming. These special features of the project were evidenced to lessen stress, subsequently promoting feelings of ‘relief’ and ‘acceptance’ amongst individual family members.

“Having the ‘relaxation room’ for the interval, that was really brilliant. Our child is on the ‘mild to moderate’ end of the spectrum and he needed to have somewhere to blow out. He needed a chance to run around and get rid of all the energy, from sitting down for so long. Having that room that he could just go and run around in, that was absolutely fantastic, just being able to do that. Not having to worry that, no Elliot, you’ve got to behave, or you can’t do that in this environment. He was absolutely able to do just what he needed to do. He enjoyed the performance and he could be himself while watching that performance. I didn’t have to stress about him being too loud, or being too fidgety. It was absolutely brilliant and I’m so glad that he got to come.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Evaluation data suggests the contemporary nature of certain Relaxed Performances was especially appreciated by the young audience members, describing productions as ‘relevant’, ‘real’, ‘wicked’ and ‘cool’. For those families with little or no previous experience of a Relaxed Performance, this element of the project was seen to encourage a greater appreciation of and connection with the live performance, and theatre more generally. This in turn may be seen to promote longer-term impacts upon engagement and participation, thereby extending the outcomes of the Relaxed Performance Project beyond the pilot and its programme.

“They really encouraged it to be interactive. Usually, you go to the theatre and you’ve got to be silent, you know, any sort of noise, it’s ‘shhh’ but here, they kind of engaged the audience. We were all made to feel a part of it and although the words were still really old, and maybe quite difficult to understand, because of the actions and the movements, you were able to completely understand it. Then to bring it into a kind of ‘street vibe’ style, that’s something that the kids would understand, fantastic! Absolutely fantastic, I’d like to see it all over again now!”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
6.1.2 Increased confidence and self-esteem

Practitioners and researchers in the fields of health and wellbeing assert that the arts are crucial in the maintenance of mental and physical health, with subsequent implications for the ways in which we operate in and contribute to society. The Relaxed Performance Project was shown to have a positive impact upon audience members’ confidence and self-esteem, providing new and pleasurable experiences in a safe and inclusive environment.

Through engagement with - and promotion of - the programme amongst their local networks, parents suggested they had noticed a general shift in public awareness and understanding of autism, thereby increasing confidence regarding visits to the theatre. Importantly, this process was seen to increase parents’ confidence in continuing to challenge preconceptions and misunderstanding regarding those individuals and families living with autism.

“It’s wonderful to be able to come to a big theatre like this, to see such a famous show. Ross does love the theatre, but we didn’t take him a lot when he was small. Because, you know, you’re sort of interrupting everybody else. People come to the theatre to enjoy the show, they want peace and quiet in the audience. But things have changed. I can remember at the beginning, asking around what support there was for children with autism. People said, what’s that, we’ve never heard of it. Now, I think you’d be hard pressed to find anybody who hadn’t actually heard of autism, even if they profess to not knowing much about it. We just need to keep chipping away!”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
For many families, taking these first small steps into a new venue to witness a live performance was a challenging experience, demanding patience, calm and acceptance. Some of those children and/or young people with autism naturally required taking time outside of the auditorium, as had been expected. The overriding acceptance and understanding of both theatre staff and audience members appeared to lessen levels of anxiety and stress that might have been induced by families needing to exit and re-enter the auditorium mid-performance. This process was in turn seen to increase levels of resilience, thereby encouraging parents to have the confidence to attempt the experience again in the future. Building confidence and self-esteem is acknowledged to be a cumulative process and as such, the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 was reported to be adding to these positive longer-term impacts.

“I thought we might try it with Max, to see if he likes the theatre. The first half wasn’t too good for him. I thought it might be one of those ‘light shows’, but it was so dark, also, I think it was a bit too noisy for him. So we came out and he’s been listening to it from outside of the auditorium, rather than watching it. We’re going to stay for the whole thing, because his Mum paid for it, I don’t want to let her down. Hopefully, in the second half, he may come and watch a bit of it with me. I guess it’s been OK, you know, being able to step outside, but I would have preferred it if Max had sat down and watched it all. But Max is one of those individuals who will say if he doesn’t like it, he doesn’t like it. I can’t force him.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

For those parents with previous experience of taking their child or children to the theatre, this was an opportunity for them to share their knowledge and experiences with other families. Observation of audience members completed during the interval of individual Relaxed Performances noted how parents engaged with those sitting beside them, often laughing and joking about the challenges they lived with every day. This supportive communication was further evidenced to increase audience members’ confidence in making judgements - above peer or social pressure - regarding what was needed for their child or children at that particular time.

“Normally, we’re the only family who are making a noise, but today it’s different. In all honesty, it makes us realise how distracting it can be. Actually, Joe has been really good today and is really concentrating on the show. It is distracting when people are making lots of noise, but it’s great that today it doesn’t matter. The length of the first half was OK. If anything, you struggle more if there’s an interval. We managed to keep him in here, but he’s asking to go home now. We’ve learned from experience that if we leave the theatre or just move outside into the foyer during the interval, he will not come back in. That’s why we’re very much staying in our seats. If anything, we would prefer there not to be an interval, but other people need to get out and take a breath of air.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
6.1.2 Enjoyment, inspiration and motivation

It is evident that the larger majority of audience members experienced high levels of enjoyment through taking part in the Relaxed Performance Project, with individual shows described as ‘amazing’, ‘brilliant’ and ‘fantastic’. Of those audience members interviewed during or after a Relaxed Performance, the overwhelming majority of children and parents reported that they had enjoyed the experience. This positive outcome is clearly significant in supporting the potential longer-term impacts upon the children, young people and families, inspiring and stimulating further activity beyond the confines of the pilot programme.

“I liked them using the normal home things for the magic carpet and the crown and the monster. They had good imaginations. I will remember that Cinderella story too. I didn’t know the bit about the blood, you know, when they cut their feet. I really liked the bit where she was saying ‘Kinderella’ instead of ‘Cinderella’. I would like to come again, maybe to see a different show.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Parents and older siblings of those children with autism reported their enjoyment in both the performances, and at seeing younger audience members experience the unique ‘magic’ of live theatre, thereby increasing the power of ‘imagination’. In addition, audience members commented upon the inspiring nature of individual performances, encouraging them to reflect upon those shared emotions of ‘kindness’, ‘confusion’, ‘sadness’ and ‘happiness’, stimulated by the characters and/or stories being portrayed.

“I really liked that, actually. I liked the parts when they all imagined stuff. I think that’s really good for little children, because it helps them to imagine stuff when it’s not really there, you know when you hear a story. My favourite part was when they all met up again at the end. We all wanted the Mum to be there at the end! I would definitely like to come here again now.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
Enjoyment is often taken for granted when recording the outcomes of arts and cultural activity. However, the pleasure derived from such programmes is inextricably intertwined with the sense of value attributed to those activities, and the subsequent longer-term impacts upon health and wellbeing. As previously described, through its participatory and inclusive mode of delivery each Relaxed Performance encouraged audience members to venture into new performance venues, while enabling them to realise the value of the skills and resource dedicated to their overall enjoyment.

“We’ve come from just outside London, not very far. It was truly amazing! We were just saying that it’s been so sympathetically done, for just everybody in the audience. We were chatting to people, theatre staff and have realised just how adaptable they were. So when the music was a little bit loud, they brought the volume down. It’s been absolutely fantastic, not only have they really thought out everything about the performance in general but they actually considered how they were going to change the performance while it was happening, when people weren’t able to cope. That’s just amazing!”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Evaluation data collected from theatre staff further confirms the enjoyment experienced through the Relaxed Performance Project. In their communication with and observation of families engaged in the performances, they reported how many families to those popular and long-running shows were encouraged to return to the theatre, in order to revisit previous positive experiences. This element of the programme extended the audience’s appreciation and enjoyment to staff members and partner theatres more generally. Importantly, the process was then seen to promote a greater understanding and awareness of the challenges for those families living with autism, and the importance of the Relaxed Performance Project in supporting their needs.

“I spoke to many families here today, who’ve seen the show dozens of times, but for them this is another great excuse for them to see the show again, with added value. That’s all very exciting! It’s always a very emotional show to watch, because it’s all about people and about people watching it together. That’s what I just love, watching people watching the show and for me, here today, watching those families together, often it’s like the kid in the family who doesn’t have autism, they rarely get to have great family days out together, so today they can come here with Mum and Dad and watch this great show together. It’s really special.”

Front of House Team Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
6.2 Theatres

Evaluation data collected from all sources (observation and visual documentation, on-site interviews, summative evaluation questionnaires) reflected an extremely positive response from those theatres participating in the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13. Venues and their staff described the project as ‘important’ and ‘worthwhile’, while working with families living with autism was reported to be both ‘inspiring’ and ‘rewarding’. An analysis of evaluation data revealed the most significant outcomes for participant theatres were as follows:

- Development of new, increased and diverse audiences
- Skills sharing and professional support
- A shared ambition for access and inclusion.

6.2.1 Development of new, increased and diverse audiences

In the UK, there is widespread acceptance that equality and diversity in the arts is of benefit to all art lovers and society more broadly. Diversity is intrinsic to art, arts practice and culture, yet this viewpoint is often obscured to the detriment of us all. Research indicates that individuals with a disability or illness have significantly lower rates of arts attendance or participation than those without disability or illness. In addition, those families living with autism are less likely to take part in arts activities. Through the Relaxed Performance Project, SOLT/TMA in collaboration with Children & the Arts aims to redress such inequality.

“We would totally come again. I would definitely bring him to this kind of performance again. We did take him to see ‘Shrek The Musical’ and he enjoyed it but he did find it difficult to sit still. People sitting next to you, they start to judge, because they don’t understand. But this performance, you’ve got people shouting and screaming, but nobody cares, because they all understand. It’s such a beautiful thing to be able to do, it’s really lovely!”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

The Relaxed Performance Project set out to engage with children and young people with autism, providing enjoyable cultural opportunities inspired by the unique resources and programmes of eight theatres across the UK. The project also aspired to increase public awareness of the challenges experienced by those individuals and families living with autism, while gaining the advocacy and support of numerous partner organisations, including e.g. National Autistic Society; Children’s and Social Services; MENCAP; Theatre Development Fund, Broadway, USA. In order to assist the successful delivery of the programme, SOLT/TMA provided 24 specialist professional development sessions for 300 members of theatre staff (e.g. executive management teams, performers, technical staff, front of house staff, marketing staff) and volunteers.

“I think today was fantastic, in one word! I did the training with the cast on Friday. There were quite a few concerns coming up from that. Seeing them on the stage, at the end, you could see that they were really comfortable as well. They were enjoying it and what they were doing. Talking to some of the families, they were just bowled over. Fantastic that this is happening, we can actually come out to something, people aren’t judging us, that was repeated time and time again, oh and, when’s there going to be another one?”

Project Team Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

From November 2012 to June 2013, the Relaxed Performance Project engaged with a total of 4,983 audience members at eight theatres across the UK. This total audience comprised 42% families living with autism, 33% community groups (e.g. autism specific community organisations; SEN schools) and 25% others (e.g. individuals and families). Of those individuals interviewed during and/or surveyed after a Relaxed Performance, 60% reported they had never been to the theatre before as a family, 30% had never been to the theatre and 90% had never been to a Relaxed Performance. It is evident from the evaluation data that new and diverse audiences have been developed through the Relaxed Performance Project.
Firstly, there are those children and young people with autism who have not previously visited the theatre, yet have embraced this new experience. Secondly, there are those who are already regular visitors to the theatre, but have not participated in activities directed to families living with autism. Both groups are adding richness and diversity to theatre audiences across the UK and the development of live performance more widely. Importantly, these audience members are providing new learning opportunities for all theatres taking part in the Relaxed Performance Project, in terms of understanding and responding to the physical, social and intellectual needs of their communities.

“There are a lot of people who won’t be autism friendly, so families feel more comfortable coming to a performance like this with their autistic child. The importance of these events is that they open a door to get a child into a theatre. My son has come for the first time today to a big theatre. It wouldn’t be as hard now to get him into another theatre.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Through the Relaxed Performance Project, SOLT/TMA engaged with new and diverse audiences, working in close collaboration with Children & the Arts. A major part of this successful engagement must be credited to the commitment of the Relaxed Performance delivering team (i.e. Relaxed Performance Project Manager, all theatre staff, performers and volunteers). In terms of audience development, this has been a striking element of the project, using an accessible and inclusive model of delivery to engage directly with children and young people with autism, while acting as the conduit between the theatres, the audience members and all other stakeholders.

The programme has subsequently developed valuable and meaningful partnerships with individuals and partner organisations. Importantly, these relationships have encouraged wide and diverse audiences to participate in and benefit from the participant theatres resources and programmes, both during and beyond the scope of the Relaxed Performance Project. The learning outcomes gained from this programme - especially regarding engaging with children and young people with autism - will prove invaluable in developing this and future audience development and access programmes.
6.2.2 Skills sharing and professional support

As previously described, theatre staff and volunteers were encouraged to take part in a training session led by the Relaxed Performance Project Manager in close collaboration with each theatre’s education and/or access team. Training sessions were delivered some days before the performance and included autism-specific presentations. The aims and objectives of the Relaxed Performance Project were also introduced during these sessions, followed by an opportunity to raise any questions and/or issues. Shorter sessions were offered to all front-of-house theatre staff on the day of the performance, in order to revise learning and accommodate the theatre’s working schedules.

“We prepared the front of house staff and all of the people who work at the theatre. We train them as a matter of course to work with people with autism, but the cast as well, we made sure they had training and understood what was going to happen in the auditorium and how that might affect their performance. We then had to train the crew and adjust the performance, so they understood what autism was and why we had to lower the light levels or sound levels. Then also, it has been great having the Disney volunteers and the NAS volunteers in the building, having people volunteering on the day and giving up their weekends.”

Project Team Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

The Relaxed Performance Project Manager delivered 24 training sessions to 300 individuals, including a number of staff and volunteers from partner organisations and received an extremely positive response from those who attended. Sessions were described as ‘practical’, ‘useful’ and ‘valuable’ in preparing theatre staff and volunteers for delivering the Relaxed Performance Project, and working with families living with autism more broadly.
“We obviously need to strike a balance between the needs of the audience members at the Relaxed Performance and wider Health and Safety for everyone. Lots of times, children try to run on stage, that sort of thing, so we have to be prepared. That was a good thing today, that we had those people who were experienced. Before the show, Kirsty did a training session with some of the new Ushers, then they stayed to watch the show as members of the audience. That gives them an idea of what might happen, so they get the kind of feel of it.”

Project Team Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Through their participation in the training sessions and the Relaxed Performance Project more generally, theatre staff especially acknowledged the immediate impacts upon their professional practice (e.g. greater awareness and understanding of autism; enhanced observation skills; improved audience engagement skills; increased confidence in working with specific needs; discovering new ways of performing). In addition to those positive outcomes for theatre staff and volunteers, these impacts might be seen to benefit audience members, beyond the confines of each theatre and the Relaxed Performance Project itself. For those theatres with previous experience of delivering Relaxed Performances, evaluation data attested to the ‘embedding’ of skills and practice across the organisation and more specifically, in terms of preparing visiting performers and/or their companies.

“Different Relaxed Performances have different levels of response. The guys will react to that in terms of sound levels or lights and stuff, changing it as it goes along. But that’s fine because we programme them late enough in the run that we all have our feet under the table, so it’s fine. It’s interesting with those companies that come in, but we always make them sit down and go through everything a long way in advance, in terms of the access programming. When the actors are contracted, they are told about that. They know from the beginning what is expected of them. I think that many of them get a lot of enjoyment out of it.”

Project Team Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Importantly, training delivered through the Relaxed Performance Project was evidenced to engender an holistic approach to professional development, where all members of staff were included and encouraged to realise their unique contribution and skills in achieving positive outcomes for audience members. This was once again seen to promote feelings of pride and satisfaction, from the youngest cast members to those more experienced members of staff.

“Then there was the process of training the cast and training front of house. They’ve already had autism awareness training in the past, but it was building upon that and getting them ready for this particular performance. They all felt incredibly honoured and really thrilled to be doing something special. We all feel it’s really important. They found today really extraordinary and even the little kids in the cast, they were really excited and they understood what it meant, they got what we are trying to do and why the performance has to be done in these ways.”

Project Team Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
6.2.3  A shared ambition for access and inclusion

At the outset of each Relaxed Performance, theatre staff suggested they hoped that audience members might feel ‘welcomed and included’, ‘gain enjoyment’ and become ‘more confident about theatre visits’ from engaging with the project. For theatres and the sector more generally, they hoped that ‘preconceptions would be challenged’, ‘barriers would be removed’, ‘access would be improved’ and the Relaxed Performance Project would result in ‘a greater understanding of those living with autism’, thereby leading to increased social inclusion and community cohesion. Evaluation data collected from audience members, theatre staff and volunteers suggests that these ambitions - at least in the short term - have been achieved. As described previously, audiences reported the numerous benefits from their engagement, while theatre staff and volunteers frequently attested to their changing perceptions regarding awareness, understanding and acceptance of autism.

“For the team here, people need to learn about autism, so today is actually educating everyone here about what autism is. The feeling of being judged is what these people face every single day. We want to make sure that it’s not just here that our team members take notice and understand but when they step outside of the theatre, in their everyday lives, when they see somebody travelling on a tube or maybe in a restaurant, they actually realise that a person has autism and that they can help those people, by taking a non-judgemental stance.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Interview data and responses to summative e.questionnaires suggest the majority of theatre staff and volunteers experienced the Relaxed Performance Project as a ‘collaborative venture’, with ‘shared aims and objectives’ for greater access and inclusion. Staff and volunteers of each participant theatre recognised their collective support and advocacy were key to the development and successful delivery of the programme. Technical staff meanwhile suggested that attention to detail was a necessary element in ensuring a balance between providing ‘access’, without compromising the ‘quality’ of the production.

“It’s the ‘tweaks’ that you make that can really make the difference. We don’t want to change the show, because we don’t want to give the audience a compromise, so it’s just finding ways to make it a little bit different. The sound is a little bit different, some of the percussive elements are a little bit toned down, just to make it a little bit more accessible. To hopefully stop those ‘triggers’ occurring, so that more people enjoy the more of the show.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
In addition to the specific knowledge and skills relating to their own theatre and its programme, staff described how they were keen to provide ‘enjoyable’, ‘memorable’ and ‘positive’ experiences for audience members. In supporting the delivery of the Relaxed Performance Project and witnessing the pleasure derived by the numerous children, young people and families from taking part in the project, theatre staff and volunteers themselves were observed to gain increased satisfaction in their professional roles.

“It was fantastic today! It was one of those emotional journeys that I don’t think you can ever copy in the world. It’s really hard to put into words, the emotions that you feel! I didn’t actually watch the show, I watched the families, Mums and Dads watching their children watch the show. It was the happiness of seeing them see that their children were having a good time, that was so valuable. It was absolutely beautiful!”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

The Relaxed Performance Project was devised as a partnership programme between SOLT/TMA and The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts. Through engaging with colleagues across the sector - and its eight partner theatres more specifically - a main aim of the project was to promote cross-sector collaboration, as a means to enhance audience development and access programmes. As previously described, the training programme brought together theatre staff and volunteers - including a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and interests - from across the participant theatres and additional programme partners. This process was reported to result in ‘making links’, ‘sharing skills’ and ‘stimulating further thinking’ regarding theatres’ audience development and public engagement programmes. It is evident that the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 has encouraged recognition of the vast potential and resource available for developing future, similar collaborative initiatives. Importantly and building upon the successful outcomes of the pilot, all theatres engaged in the project have scheduled more Relaxed Performances in their forthcoming programmes.

“We’ll get to the point where we do them regularly once a year, or maybe even twice a year, there’s clearly so much demand for it. If you look at the numbers that see the show every year, as a proportion of the population, there are that many families who are affected, who have somebody with autism in the family. What we’d never want to do, is to make the show, on other days, so that it isn’t good for people with autism. We wouldn’t want it to be the only one that you can come to; but this is different in making it a non-judgemental atmosphere, so that people can come and enjoy it as a family together.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
7 Learning outcomes

The evaluation data suggests that the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 resulted in extremely positive benefits for the larger majority of stakeholders including those audience members with autism, their families, performers, delivering theatre staff and volunteers. Much learning has taken place, which will inevitably provide the opportunity for reflection and discussion. As with any similar programme of such a sensitive nature (i.e. engaging with individuals with specific needs), it has also generated many valuable insights - from those delivering and participating - all of which will undoubtedly support its further development.

The following learning outcomes are for consideration by the Relaxed Performance Project Team and all other stakeholders, in order to assist in the processes of reflection, discussion and forward planning. The list is not exhaustive, but aims to raise those issues deemed most important by the evaluation, in supporting the programme through its next phase of delivery. Evaluation data collected through formative interviews and summative e.questionnaires with audience members, performers, theatre staff and volunteers revealed the following themes:

- Programming
- Publicity and promotion
- Professional development opportunities
- Supporting individual needs
- Providing a model of best practice.
7.1 Programming

An analysis of evaluation data collected from all sources suggests that through delivering ‘a rich and diverse programme’ with ‘high quality productions’ the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 was able to reach a wide range of ages, interests and backgrounds. The project delivered eight Relaxed Performances across the UK, attended by 4,983 individuals from pre-school children to elders. The programme encouraged audience members to hold the project (and the participant theatres) in high esteem, leading to numerous benefits for audiences and theatres alike. Project partners recognised the importance of providing a positive experience through the production - and the theatre more generally - in supporting those longer-term aspirations of the Relaxed Performance Project.

“If you can bring a family to a good theatre environment for their first visit, they will have a good memory from which to build upon for future experiences. If we can find someone who can open those doors, to do something more specific, that is the way in to other experiences. The ultimate is that any person could go to any theatre, at any point in their lives!”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

As previously described, attendance for each Relaxed Performance differed from venue to venue. It is evident that those high profile and nationally acclaimed productions (i.e. The Lion King; The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time) resulted in extremely large audiences. These particular Relaxed Performances - although offering a substantial reduction in ticket prices - were more expensive for families as compared with other partner theatres, yet this did not appear to deter audiences. Nor did it preclude those living far from the capital, with audience members travelling long distances (e.g. Bristol, Leeds, Stoke on Trent) and staying overnight in London to see the show(s). However, smaller and/or lesser-known productions (i.e. 1001 Nights) also attracted positive numbers. Those theatres engaging with a smaller audience in the pilot were recognised to be those for whom this was their first Relaxed Performance and as such, had not yet developed an audience and/or reputation for the programme.

Several parents meanwhile reported that their first and/or previous experience of theatre had been in taking their child or children to see a pantomime. However, such productions were described as challenging for those young audience members with autism, due to the high levels of light, noise and expected audience participation. With the needs of this specific audience in mind, pantomime may not necessarily be seen as the most appropriate genre to include in future phases of the Relaxed Performance programme.
“There was a child here today who didn’t like it at first and didn’t want to be here. She didn’t want to be here because she doesn’t like cheering, clapping or booing and all three happened. Her first trip to the theatre was to a pantomime, but her parents didn’t realise this at the time. Her first experience of the theatre was all of those things that she didn’t like. That is what she now understands theatre to be.”

Community Group Leader, Relaxed Performance 2013

Finally, reducing the price of seats for the Relaxed Performance was seen to engage with a far wider and more diverse audience. For those families with limited means, visiting the theatre is not necessarily a viable option, especially considering the additional expenses of travel, accommodation and meals. Yet the Relaxed Performance Project enabled families to experience quality productions in high profile venues, often at a fraction of the normal costs. In order to further develop and retain those audiences with limited means, it is evident that pricing structures should be affordable, yet realistic. Individual theatres will approach this issue according to their specific budgeting systems, however the financial (and indeed in-kind) support necessary for sustaining the delivery of the Relaxed Performance Project is an issue recommended for discussion and by all stakeholders.

“We live below the poverty line and do not generally get freebies as we are not unemployed. I was able to bring our 13 year old daughter who had never been to the Globe, never seen a Shakespeare performance and was scared she would not follow it but did, so we now have a magical day out to treasure. She is quite high functioning but still suffers from panic in crowded places. Please pass on our thanks to the Globe and who ever sponsored the performance.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

It would appear then that the importance of high quality productions, providing subsidised and/or affordable ticketing, in addition to the growing positive reputation of the Relaxed Performance programme are all key to engaging with the widest potential audience. It is recommended that future phases of the Relaxed Performance Project should ensure their consideration and inclusion.
7.2 Publicity and promotion

Marketing of the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 was completed at a local level by the individual participant theatres, while wider networks (e.g. National Autistic Society; MENCAP; Children’s and Social Services; Theatre Development Fund, Broadway, USA) were used to publicise the project at a national and even international level, via SOLT/TMA and Children & the Arts. The project produced and disseminated a suite of publicity leaflets and press releases generating 15 media items across the UK and beyond (e.g. The Guardian, Radio 4, The Social Issue, The Stage).

Evaluation data collected from participant theatres via summative e-questionnaires (delivered by the Relaxed Performance Project Manager) suggested that the importance of using national, regional and local networks was key to engaging with those families living with autism in their communities. Many theatre staff reported that new and successful collaborations had been established between themselves and regional branches of the National Autistic Society, providing immediate contacts with this new audience, while supporting the Relaxed Performance Project more generally.

“We used the NAS network, we announced it through the NAS and the tickets sold through those channels, the tickets literally just went, through them. We had back up theories of doing some specific and direct marketing, but none of that was necessary. The tickets went more quickly than we could have ever imagined. We immediately confirmed that we would do another one, that will take place in May of next year.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

It was acknowledged that ‘word of mouth’ and ‘personal recommendation’ proved a more effective means of marketing the programme than advertising. Several theatre staff reported that marketing through their ‘traditional routes’ was not effective in this instance. Rather there was a need for
establishing ‘personal and individual relationships’ in order to ‘engender trust’ and ‘commitment’ to the programme, subsequently resulting in greater numbers of bookings. It was suggested that one member of staff needed to be given time to ‘develop and nurture’ these contacts, not always feasible within the constraints of a fixed term project and/or the limited time and resource available to certain partner venues. There was also the concern voiced by partners regarding the sense of ‘the unknown’ in terms of demand, alongside establishing the sensitive balance between promoting subsidised tickets, while ensuring the programme engaged with families living with autism and/or disability.

“The unknown was the most difficult problem to overcome. We had no idea what the demand for tickets would be like, or how people would react to such a performance. We also had to make sure that our messaging was extremely clear. We reduced ticket prices to make the performance accessible, but did not want this to become the reason to see the show. We had to be very sensitive about our copy and messaging throughout.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

It was reported that the timing of individual Relaxed Performances (e.g. evening rather than matinee performance; immediately following Christmas holiday; coinciding with a schools INSET day) all affected the promotion of the programme and subsequent bookings. In order to maximise engagement and participation in future phases of the Relaxed Performance Project, theatres would be recommended to take time in building up trusting relationships (in person) with appropriate interest groups and community organisations, in supporting the successful promotion of their programmes to the widest potential audience.

“We are an organisation which support adults with autism and Asperger’s Syndrome to live ‘everyday lives’ through supported living over various services in Berkshire and Oxfordshire. We supported ten of the individuals to attend the show on Sunday. For some of them, this was quite an undertaking (making the journey into London and on to the theatre; coping with the busy environment in the theatre itself), but we were confident the individuals would enjoy the show with the right support and planning.”

Community Group Leader, Relaxed Performance 2013

Converting those initial expressions of interest into theatre attendance is likely to require a ‘long slow burn’, yet these connections are likely to reap rewards in the longer term. Autism support organisations will undoubtedly have further suggestions for attracting local audiences, location specific knowledge which might be exploited and maximised. This in turn will increase ownership and empowerment of the project within each Relaxed Performance partner venue and beyond.
7.3 Professional development opportunities

Evaluation data suggests that the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 provided valuable professional development opportunities for those individuals participating in the programme. As described previously, the project delivered a series of autism specific training sessions to the staff and volunteers of the eight participant theatres. This programme was evidenced to have benefits for all parts of the organisation and including e.g. executive management teams, performers, front of house staff, marketing and technical staff. In addition, through the delivery of the Relaxed Performance, performers and front of house staff alike reported how the experience had impacted upon their professional practice (e.g. a greater awareness and understanding of autism; the nuanced effects of their performance upon audience response; increased satisfaction in their role within the theatre).

“I’m a musician and I play double bass in the musician’s gallery at the Globe for Romeo and Juliet. I’ve never worked with the Globe before, so it’s been quite interesting to see how the music has been dovetailed in to serve function for the actual drama of the play today. It’s been very interesting to see how it has had a calming effect on the audience. Just very simple things, which has been quite unexpected from my point of view.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Evaluation data collected from audience members meanwhile suggests the Relaxed Performance Project had additional gains, in supporting the research and development of those individuals with a professional interest in the programme (e.g. educational psychologists; mental health workers; autism support group leaders). Although not a specific aim of the project, these positive outcomes might be seen to stimulate a ‘ripple effect’ of learning and experience, of obvious benefit to their specific field of work and the community more broadly.
“We’ve come primarily to see the play, but I’m also an educational psychologist so I thought the concept of Relaxed Performances was really interesting. I love the book, so I’m keen to see how they translate that to the stage. I understand it to be providing a ‘freer’ atmosphere in the theatre; a toning down of light and sound in the performance, so that audience members don’t become anxious or over-stimulated. This works in two ways. It’s positive for those audience members who are on the spectrum, but it’s also good to expose everyone else to ‘difference’ within an audience. Most importantly, it’s saying that theatre is for everyone!”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

Theatre staff and volunteers frequently used the terms ‘inspiring’, ‘uplifting’ and ‘humbling’ when describing their observation of and interactions with those young audience members with autism and their families. Although many acknowledged that the Relaxed Performance had been ‘hard work’ and sometimes ‘emotional’, there was the suggestion made by many that such challenges had been counterbalanced by the wholly positive outcomes, describing their experience as both ‘enjoyable’ and ‘rewarding’.

“As ‘Scar’ said at the beginning of the performance, we wanted to make sure that society gave something back to people with autism. The reason this performance happened, is that people with autism can come to any performance, but we wanted to make them feel comfortable in an atmosphere without prejudice. So, they could come and see a show without people looking at them, or judging them and that’s exactly what this performance did.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

The learning experiences of the Relaxed Performance Project might now be presented to a wider professional and public audience, in the fields of arts, culture, health and social services. A ‘sharing’ event is also recommended for each of the participant theatres, in order to present the programme and its outcomes to all existing and potential stakeholders. Friends and trustees, theatre staff, local policy makers, community organisations and funders might be invited to this event, in order to raise awareness, generate ideas and stimulate further support for Relaxed Performances and wider access programmes.
7.4 Supporting individual needs

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 aimed to encourage ‘families living with autism’ to engage with theatre and live performance. Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with - and relates to - other people and the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, in that while all people with autism share certain areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in very different ways. At the same time, all people with autism or Asperger’s syndrome are unique and have their own special skills and abilities. These deserve as much recognition and understanding as the areas they find challenging. An acknowledged difficulty then for the Relaxed Performance Project was to engage with such a diversity of individual needs and expectations across the audience. Through their inclusive and personal style of delivery, participant theatres embraced the diverse needs of audience members, in creative and meaningful ways (i.e. reduced ticket prices; personalised booking information; Relaxed Performance Visual Guides; monitoring of sound and light levels; chill-out spaces).

“I didn’t know about the production, it was just by chance through reading the book. I ordered it as a Kindle book and I was directed to the theatre’s website. I didn’t come through the usual networks, you know, The Autistic Society, but I’ve been really impressed by all the follow up since I booked the tickets. The ‘visual story’ which I forwarded to my son for him to look at before we came. The fact that you haven’t read the book doesn’t matter, as you have the guide to prepare you. Then the follow up message to explain that there was a cast change today, all of those things take a lot of time and effort. It all feels very reassuring.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
It is evident that the programme resulted in highly positive impacts for the majority of audience members, as reported in the previous sections of this report. These successful outcomes are undoubtedly due to the commitment, energy and enthusiasm of the Relaxed Performance delivering team (i.e. Relaxed Performance Project Manager, all theatre staff, performers and volunteers). In providing autism specific training sessions to the participant theatres, staff were both prepared and empowered to attend to the needs of their audience.

“A lot of the time, parents of children with special needs might feel that theatre is quite a difficult place to take their children, if they suffer from Tourette’s or autism, or something similar. There’s a perceived way of behaving in a theatre, so many of these parents wouldn’t normally take their children to the theatre because they couldn’t guarantee what’s perceived to be ‘good’ behaviour. Relaxed Performances are an opportunity to allay those fears and say, it might well be that your son or daughter isn’t able to cope with it, and that’s fine.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

For certain young audience members, light and sound levels needed to be adjusted, while for others this was not of concern. Some young audience members found it necessary to move around or leave the auditorium during the performance, while others remained seated throughout. Finally, many young audience members expressed extreme hunger and thirst stimulated by anxiety or excitement, requiring parents to search out refreshments during the performance. These demands were met with patience and understanding by theatre staff, who were frequently praised for their ‘flexibility’ and ‘sensitivity’, described by audience members as ‘attentive’ and ‘accommodating’ in meeting the requirements of those young audience members with autism.

“All of the theatre staff have been really accommodating, being really vigilant to what has been happening in the audience. So even when people have got up during the show and needed to move about, it’s not been an issue. I had to run to Tesco halfway through, because he got hungry! He gets really anxious when he gets hungry. The staff were so helpful, they said, there’s somewhere over there, showed me where to go, then let me back in.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

It might be perceived that such an approach is both time-consuming and resource intensive, yet the longer term impacts upon those young people with autism and their families, in addition to the benefits for theatres - and society more widely - far outweigh the short term expense. Future phases of the Relaxed Performance Project would therefore be advised to continue to deliver the programme in a wholly inclusive and accessible manner while attending to the diverse needs of individual audience members, thereby promoting tolerance and understanding across audiences, organisations and communities.
7.5 Providing a model of best practice

The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 resulted in numerous positive outcomes for multiple beneficiaries. The programme brought about important social impacts and demonstrated an effective model of practice for all partner organisations. Importantly, the project successfully delivered an inspiring live performance programme to numerous families living with autism, while providing valuable learning opportunities for theatres across the UK, in gaining a greater understanding of their existing and potential audiences. In addition, the national profile of Children & the Arts working in close collaboration with SOLT/TMA was reported to bring both advocacy and validation to the project in its pilot phase.

“The discussions alone were invaluable. Though it is clear that Relaxed Performances vary greatly from night to night and venue to venue, being prepared was of course essential. Also, I felt it brought gravitas to my conversations within the theatre with my colleagues about the need for and nature of Relaxed Performances. Lastly, the cast were clearly pleased to be part of a pioneering national effort.”

Theatre Staff Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

The Relaxed Performance Project was seen to extend beyond many of those activities currently available to children and young people with autism. It made allowances for the young audience members, yet it was delivered by the participant theatres as a far more egalitarian and mainstream activity, in which audience members were able to ‘be themselves’, so that parents might forget (albeit for a short time) that autism was a major concern in their lives. An important issue highlighted by the Relaxed Performance Project then is the ability of arts and cultural activity to maximise the capacities of individuals with autism. That is, any disability observed external to the theatre was not an issue within the context of the performance. In turn, this reinforces the importance of providing programmes promoting ‘positive’ higher-level activities for those children and young people with autism and avoiding the ‘deficit’ model as far as is possible.
“You might be able to take able-bodied children to the theatre without any worries, but if we took a group to another venue, you’d have to sit next to someone who might not have any experience or understanding of disability, which could be stressful for everybody. Whereas here, our first impression, is that they are really geared up to include everybody.”

Community Group Member, Relaxed Performance 2013

The pilot project - and its subsequent findings - therefore provide an innovative research model, in that it sits outside of the conventional interventions being delivered by health and social services to children and young people with autism and/or disability. However, the Relaxed Performance Project might be seen to cross the divide of arts and health, in providing inspiring cultural opportunities for families living with autism, alongside professional development opportunities in support of theatres and their staff.

“We've been here before as an organisation and have always had such a positive experience. Families and children have asked to come back here. We find it a very helpful, approachable, how can I put it, less stressful experience. The government makes a big thing about the Equality Act of 2010, so theatres don’t necessarily discriminate against individuals, but unless they truly encourage these families to feel welcome here, they probably wouldn’t come in.”

Community Group Leader, Relaxed Performance 2013

The Relaxed Performance Project would provide an excellent case study for presentation both online and at regional, national and international conferences (e.g. Autism, National Autistic Society, International Journal for Arts and Health, The Stage, SOLT/TMA and Children & the Arts). A toolkit and/or resource pack might be produced in order to share this new learning model with arts and cultural organisations across the UK and beyond.

In addition, the evaluation of the Relaxed Performance Project might be shared locally with all community, education, public and private health providers to children and young people with autism, in order to explore whether new services can be developed to support community visits to the theatre. Finally, the evaluation and dissemination process will explore the best means to support the legacy and further development of the Relaxed Performance Project, aiming to extend its positive outcomes beyond the pilot phase and 2013.
8 Conclusions

This evaluation has examined the processes, outputs and outcomes of the Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13, as experienced by audience members, project team members, museum staff and volunteers. The findings have revealed many positive impacts resulting from the programme for all stakeholders, including The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts, The Society of London Theatre and The Theatrical Management Association (SOLT/TMA). The evaluation has also described the main learning outcomes experienced by the programme, as reported by both deliverers and audience members.

The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts understands that creative and cultural activities have the power to transform lives, and have a proven positive impact on children and young people’s educational, social and emotional development. SOLT/TMA meanwhile supports this vision, engaging with audiences through inspiring live performance programmes, while promoting the pleasure of visiting the theatre. With generous support from the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation, the Relaxed Performance Project was a new collaboration between Children & the Arts and SOLT/TMA aiming to encourage families living with autism to engage with theatre and live performance.

Delivered by SOLT/TMA, the pilot project engaged the support and advocacy of eight high profile theatres across the UK, delivering a vibrant programme of Relaxed Performances to a total audience of 4,983 children, young people and adults with experience of autism. The project also delivered a programme of 24 autism specific training sessions to 300 individual theatre staff and volunteers. Positive outcomes for audience members described in this evaluation included: access to theatre and live performance; increased confidence and self-esteem; enjoyment, inspiration and motivation. Benefits for participant theatres meanwhile included: the development of new, increased and diverse audiences; skills sharing and professional support; a shared ambition for access and inclusion.
The Relaxed Performance Project 2012/13 developed a model of effective practice for dissemination at both a national and international level, in order to share its learning outcomes with audience members and theatres across the UK and beyond. Importantly, the project has provided a new example of how theatres - and their programmes - might impact upon those critical social issues of access, inclusion, tolerance and understanding. Evaluation data collected from partner venues reveals a strong and continued commitment to the project beyond 2013, with theatres providing dates for their next scheduled Relaxed Performances. In addition to sustaining these partnership relationships, the benefits of participation for both individuals and organisations - as evidenced in this evaluation report - might now be shared with all stakeholders, with a view to further engaging the skills, experience and resources of both existing and potential partners, in order to support the project in its next important phase of delivery.

The successes of the Relaxed Performance Project have undoubtedly been due to the shared vision, energy and commitment of Kirsty Hoyle and Ruth Smith with support from the Relaxed Performance project team, theatre staff and volunteers. Time now needs to be devoted to discussing and reflecting upon both the achievements and learning outcomes of the Relaxed Performance Project, prior to moving forward in the most appropriate ways for all involved. This process will prove invaluable in suggesting how the project might be best developed and sustained, in order to realise its ultimate aims.

“I found the boy’s response to many things very interesting. It was quite different to other people’s reactions. I did understand his responses though, because sometimes I think I feel like that. It was quite tough, um, you felt for the boy, because you could see he was upset but you didn’t know what he should do. You put yourself in his place and I think he is about the same age as me. I don’t really like to read too much, but this might make me think about reading the book. I don’t think that I’ve ever been here before, but it’s um, generally quite cosy! I think I like it more than the cinema. It’s easier to follow real people than it is to follow on the screen.”

Audience Member, Relaxed Performance 2013
References and bibliography

ACE (2009). *Using the arts and culture to deliver positive activities for young people*. London: ACE


JRF (2010). *Attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* London: JRF


List of images

Front cover images from top:

1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre
The Mouse and His Child, Royal Shakespeare Company
1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre
Spot’s Birthday Party, Oxford Playhouse
The Lion King, Lyceum Theatre
Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare’s Globe

Report images:

P8     The Lion King, Lyceum Theatre
P10    1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre
P19    The Lion King, Lyceum Theatre
P22    Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare’s Globe
P24    The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Apollo Theatre
P26    Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare’s Globe
P29    1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre
P33    1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre
P36    The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Apollo Theatre
P38    Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare’s Globe
P40    Touch Tour, Unicorn Theatre
P42    1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre
P44    1001 Nights, Unicorn Theatre

Image credits: