It's possible: Creating an ability inclusive production approach for the musical *Cinderella*

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IT'S POSSIBLE:
CREATING AN ABILITY INCLUSIVE PRODUCTION APPROACH
FOR THE MUSICAL CINDERELLA

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa
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This Study by: Danielle Jean Schmaltz

Entitled: It's Possible: Creating an Ability Inclusive Production Approach for the Musical *Cinderella*

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors

_________________________  ________________________________
Date    Gretta Berghammer, Honors Thesis Advisor, Theatre Dept.

_________________________  ________________________________
Date    Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program
Dedication

To Gretta Berghammer, who taught me to lead with my heart.

It is apparent to anyone who knows her that Gretta is a force to be reckoned with. Since meeting her, Gretta has been an inspiration to me as both a teacher and as a person. Gretta was the one to open the door for me to the world of teaching artistry, which has changed my life and will continue to fulfill me in my future endeavors. I am forever grateful for her wisdom, compassion, and to have witnessed her enormously contagious love of play in action. Her profound impact is warmly felt by the many generations of lives her work has touched. My thesis, my Theatre for Youth & Communities emphasis, and my future career would be quite impossible without her.
Acknowledgements

The nature of this project and the practice of theatre relies on collaboration. This thesis could not have been completed without the many individuals who worked on creating TheatreUNI’s production of Roger and Hammerstein’s stage musical, *Cinderella*. This includes the cast, crew, and production team of the show, and special consideration must be given to the Ability Inclusive Design Team, led by Professor Gretta Berghammer, and comprising of the students enrolled in the spring 2022 Theatre in Education course at the University of Northern Iowa: Emily Gillman, Bradley Krug, Maya Justice, Nicole Loftus, Gabe Staudt, Gretchen Gehrls, Kaitlyn Moran, Umas Nangavulan, Alex Overturf, Chance Elton, Owen Smith, M’Lin Oliver, Ethan Nielsen, Alissa Dengler, Kelley Meinen, Kat Strouth, Robbie Williams, Olivia Sobek, Spaz Eigenheer, Henry Luker, Justine Williamson, Tatyana Reed. Additional photography credits must be given to Spaz Eigenheer for providing images of audience members engaging with the interactive lobby displays.
Introduction

This honors thesis was conducted in conjunction with, and in support of the combined efforts of the many people involved with Cinderella and Gretta Berghammer's Theater in Education Capstone course (TIE) at the University of Northern Iowa. Together, we had a goal to produce ability inclusive performances of Rodger and Hammerstein’s stage musical, Cinderella. These special performances were created to support the theatre-going experiences of people with autism, or other cognitive delays that can impact learning, assimilating to social cues, and other executive functions. The adaptations implemented were intended to create a space free of social stigmas and constructs. We wanted to provide means for our audience members to engage with live theatre fully and freely.

I chose to center my thesis around this project because of my passion for the subject matter and its relativity to my future career goals. I have gotten to work closely with Professor Berghammer throughout my time at UNI, as she is the sole instructor for one of my degree emphases; Theatre for Youth & Communities. Through this course of study, I have had various experiences working with youth in theatrical and educational settings as a teaching artist; however, until this semester I had not worked significantly with individuals with cognitive delays. During my first year at UNI, I observed Professor Berghammer’s devised immersive theatrical experience, To Touch the Moon. Though the processes and products look very different, this production was similar to Cinderella in the fact that it aimed to provide an entry point to theatre to individuals with exceptionalities. I was fascinated by the unique and groundbreaking work itself, and I was moved by the reactions I saw amongst the youth participants. I saw first-hand that this kind of work had immense value, and I wanted a chance to engage on a deeper level with this kind of approach to theatre production. The perfect
opportunity to accomplish this arose when TheatreUNI announced Professor Berghammer would be creating ability inclusive performances of their main stage production, Cinderella. My goal for this thesis was to identify and implement the best practices for producing ability inclusive (also referred to in the industry as sensory-friendly) theatre. I would accomplish this in four areas: an initial research period to gauge existing works and practices, supplementing the learning and in-class work of the TIE class, performing as a cast member in the show, and collecting testimonials from the participants in an anonymous survey.

Background Preparation

I began by researching examples of ability inclusive theatre. As an emerging field, there was a limited pool of existing work to pull from. Through my research I discovered the Theatre Development Fund (TDF) as the primary resource for ability inclusive and sensory-friendly theatre guidelines. Their work can be seen on multiple Broadway stages, with sensory-friendly performances of shows like The Lion King and Aladdin. The Autism Friendly Performances page on their website contains samplings of social narratives (documents or videos that verbally and visually describe the process of doing something unfamiliar to the viewer in an easily digestible format) and other supplemental materials catered to individual shows. These served as a guide for what kinds of information I would need to consider sharing with our audiences for Cinderella. I also researched other companies around the globe, especially children’s theatres that incorporate similar practices, such as the Kennedy Center and Sensorium Theatre. While analyzing these materials I noticed that each production executed things differently. Most of the companies I looked at were creating original works specifically designed for their intended audiences. I knew our process for Cinderella would be different because we would be adapting
an already existing body of work – and a well-known one at that. We would need to consider how we might prepare the audience to see a familiar story in a new way.

Though I was not enrolled as a student in the Theatre in Education Capstone course, I attended the class sessions and participated in the group work. The first weeks of the semester were geared towards changing our lenses about how we approach theatre. We were able to speak with individuals that provided us with information on the populations we anticipated working with. These sources included: Molly Mattaini, a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin - Madison in Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies with a Specialization in Theatre for Youth and a doctoral minor in Special Education; Jenny Allen, Service Coordinator at North Star Community Services; as well as community members who identify on the autism spectrum. I also presented my research on best practices for social narratives to the class during this time, so everyone possessed knowledge on how to effectively share information in an accessible format to individuals with varying abilities. After a foundational understanding had been established, the class was divided into three focus groups: app development, interactive lobby design, and support while watching the show. My role in the class as a point person for the social narratives evolved into also being a fully-fledged group member alongside the students enrolled in the course. We collaborated on building a distinct and interactive environment that would transport audience members into the world of Cinderella from the moment they entered the building. We planned hands-on activities, visual displays, and multiple seating options to accommodate various needs and interests while patrons waited to take their seats. An advisory board comprised of individuals with exceptionalities, their guardians, and those who work in related fields helped guide and inform our decisions throughout the process until we formed our final concepts. The following elements are the results of our work.
Original Adaptive Elements

A three-sided display for patrons to hang their completed drawings.

A photo booth with Cinderella related props and accessories.
A station for patrons to decorate the windows with *Cinderella*-themed stickers.

A display of Cinderella stories from other cultures.
Banners similar to the ones used in the set design displayed various production photos to give audiences a sneak peak of the people and things they would see on stage.

The doors to the theatre were designed like a castle entrance to create a threshold to cross into the world of the play.

Themed signage was created to help patrons navigate the space.
A quiet room was constructed in the adjacent black box theatre. Various seating and activities were available, as well as a silent livestream of the show.

A section of the space was blocked off by mats to provide additional separation in a more enclosed space.

TIE students served as ushers for the Ability Inclusive performances. They greeted each group at the door and offered them a free engagement bag containing more information cards, fidgets, and objects related to the show to use at any time.
One respondent from the anonymous survey I sent to caregivers and chaperones of the ability inclusive audience members provided the following feedback about the engagement bags: “He loved the fidget spinner, bubbles and the wand. We used the cards together to discuss the play at intermission and afterwards.”

While a different group of students selected the prop items for the engagement bags, I designed and assisted with the content and language for the supplemental materials added to the bags and passed out in the lobbies. The resulting informational cards and mini social narratives went through many drafts to ensure that they were following the best practices for sharing narrative information: strong visual images, short informative sentences, and clear language use. The materials included information about the lobby activities, how the magical moments were created with theatre technologies, and the sights and sounds that would be seen and heard during the show. Visual Story Guides to track the plot of Cinderella and a character guide were also included (see the Appendix to view the full collection of supplemental materials).

Additionally, I created the social narrative “What to Expect When Coming to See Cinderella” that was emailed to audience members a few days prior to the show. This social narrative explained the step-by-step process of coming to the theatre, including specific experiences one might have while in the space. The goal of this overarching social narrative was to prepare audience members for the transition into a new environment, which can be a source of
stress or nervousness for some individuals. One survey respondent said “I liked getting this letter ahead of time because I was able to share it with my son and front load the story and the event details. He thrives on predictability!”

Accompanying the social narrative in the pre-performance email was the link to the app that TIE students developed in collaboration with Chris Rouw, CEO of Far Reach Technologies. The app included a quiz to determine what type of character you resemble (Knight, Magical, Royalty, or Townsperson) and provided electronic versions of some of the supplemental materials described above.

Performance Considerations

The combined efforts of the TIE students were augmented by those of the cast and production team of Cinderella, as changes also had to be made to the delivery of the performance itself. This stage of the process was complex. Best practice argues for maintaining as many elements of the production as possible while staying attune to volume, lighting intensities, and the need to prepare audiences for changes in orchestration, staging and scenic locations. For the purposes of Cinderella, changes to sound and lighting levels were the most prominent. The orchestra played at a lower volume, so it was more of a “gentle whisper,” as Professor Berghammer referred to it. The house lights remained on at fifty percent brightness throughout the entire performance, so audience members were never in the dark and could easily
enter and exit the theatre at any time. Certain light cues and sequences – especially the flashing lights during magic moments – were dimmed or cut completely. The use of fog and haze was also adapted; it was used less frequently and in lower quantities. Minor blocking changes were implemented for offstage vocal moments. For example, in the prologue of the traditional performance, Cinderella is the only one seen onstage while the full company is singing offstage. For the ability inclusive show, the company came out onstage so the audience could identify where the sound was coming from and see all of the actors before the plot of the show took off.

Perhaps the most unique (and well-received) adaption was our use of a false proscenium and icons to visually track the plot of the show. A representative image was selected for each scene and hung to frame the stage. As the show progressed, the icons were lit one at a time. Audience members could reference the Visual Story Guide, which matched the icon with a brief description of the scene.

Special icons were placed at the top of the frame and would pulse to alert the audience something was about to happen. The wand pulsed before a magic moment, the music note pulsed before music began to play, and the sound icon pulsed before any abrupt or loud sounds, like the dragon roaring. There was also a clock at the center with moveable hands that displayed time as it progressed through the story.
One survey respondent commended this feature as “the most ingenious element. [My daughter] was very engaged with them in Act 1. When her attention started to drift in act two, I was able to point to the icons and bring her back into the world of the play.” Another survey respondent commented that the icons were useful for more than just our targeted ability inclusive audience members: “My "neurotypical" (whatever that means) granddaughter loved the visual schedule! She knew the story and was excited about being able to predict what happened next!”

An intangible, but very perceptible change in the atmosphere was present during ability inclusive performances. A pre-show announcement encouraged all audience members to enjoy the show in ways that were best for them. The nature of these shows enabled the collective audience to disregard traditional social constructs such as: being quiet, sitting still, and waiting until intermission to leave the theatre. Patrons could move as needed. They were free to imitate the action happening onstage. They could verbally react to what they were watching, without being hushed or taken out of the space.

I was cast in the show as Marie, the Fairy Godmother. Being a member of the cast allowed me a unique lens on the considerations a performer makes with ability inclusive theatre. Walking out onstage during the first ability inclusive performance was a bit jarring, as I was not accustomed to being able to see audience members. During the second performance when I knew what to expect, it was heartwarming to be able to catch glimpses of the audience’s reactions. I saw wands swirling in the air, bubbles being blown, and crowns atop heads. Occasionally I would see an audience member waving at me or hear their reactions to exciting moments or items mistakenly dropped onstage. The atmosphere was lively, and I felt a connection to the
audience that was unlike anything I had previously experienced. It felt like they were a part of
the story with us.

Audience and Participant Feedback

Being a cast member also meant I was unable to be an usher and observe audience
members interacting with our lobby activities. I was also never able to sit back and view the
completed from an audience perspective. As there is only so much audience reaction I can absorb
while I am onstage completing my duties as an actor, I relied heavily on testimonials from the
anonymous survey I sent to the caregivers and chaperones of the audience members with
exceptionalities. The following quotes are from the overall comments the respondents made
about their experience:

“The performance was not watered down for this all-inclusive audience. Rather,
the accommodations made were of benefit to all.”

“I loved this event. I didn't need to worry about my granddaughter being
completely engrossed in the production--- she sang along, danced, conducted the
orchestra, and pointed out changes in the visual schedule.”

“Was my first time and I’d definitely be interested in going again, I have tics that
are triggered by sensory stimuli so I sometimes avoid shows as to not distract
performers, and when I do go I don’t always stim when I want but this one made
me comfortable to”

The feedback we received indicates that we were successful in our goal of producing a
theatrical experience free from social stigmas that supported people with differing abilities.
After the performances had concluded, I was also interested in the experiences of the TIE students and their takeaways from this unique experience. Like myself, many of these individuals were experiencing ability inclusive theatre for the first time during Cinderella. Their responses reminded me of my own reactions when I originally watched To Touch the Moon in my first year of studies:

*This was a great experience that allowed me to open up my creative mindset and consider needs of others. It was a struggle at first but this class helped me learn more about individuals with exceptionalities and use that knowledge to create something meaningful.*

“This as a future teacher, I will use these ideas in class when working with non neuro typical individuals.”

“I believe all theatre should be presented in this interactive format”

“Now that the show is over I think that I would love to do another show for AI because being able to see how the work that I am doing is impacting the audiences was very eye opening and just gave me a love for inclusive theatre”

The desire for more ability inclusive opportunities in the future has been enthusiastically expressed by both parties of survey respondents, which fills me with hope for the continuation of this work. Cinderella allowed TheatreUNI to re-imagine the traditional theatrical viewing experience.
Personal Reflection and Conclusion

For me, this process was revolutionary. It expanded my perception of how one can experience theatre. It was exciting to learn about new ways to share my craft. It was powerful to witness the joy the audience members experienced at the show. This project led to new connections with members of our community – and outside of our community – whose needs are not always thoughtfully supported at the theatre. It is my hope that the importance of (and the need for) these opportunities outweigh the traditional limitations set upon theatre companies when selecting their seasons. Even during this project, we encountered financial and resource restrictions. Still, even the smallest efforts and considerations can make a world of difference for making art accessible. Providing this experience raised the bar that TheatreUNI operates at and may even inspire surrounding theatres to adopt similar practices.

I am leaving this experience equipped with skills to help design an interactive theatrical experience to support various audience members’ needs, and a passion for making theatre accessible and engaging for all. My career interests as a performer and educator provide a perfect conduit for continuing to create ability inclusive theatre. I want to implement these practices into every project I work on, not just those intentionally geared towards individuals with exceptionalities. As Professor Berghammer’s recurring phrase for this project goes, “best practice is best practice.” In theatre we have another often used phrase: “art reflects society.” The stories we tell onstage reflect the world and its inhabitants around us. The theatre industry is undergoing structural changes to ensure the bodies shown onstage reflect the makeup of our diverse society. It is time the industry gets serious about taking it a step further by ensuring our audiences represent that same level of diversity. We must continue to take responsibility for making this art accessible to all.
Works Consulted


TDF. “Autism Friendly Performances” (n.d.) https://www.tdf.org/nyc/40/Autism-Friendly-Performances


Appendix

Social Story Presentation
What to Expect When Coming to See Cinderella
What Can I Do While I Wait?
What I Will See and Hear
Magic Surprises
Character Guide
Visual Story Guide Act 1
Visual Story Guide Act 2
Cinderella App