



Case Study Follow-Up Report



Theatre Communications Group (TCG)'s **Audience (R)Evolution** program, a multi-year project funded by the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation**, studies, promotes, and supports successful audience engagement and community development strategies in the U.S. not-for-profit theatre. The program has grown to include reports, case studies, convenings, grants, blogs, and videos, all available on the TCG website.

Building on the 2013 case studies, which were based on audience engagement and community development findings of **AMS Planning & Research**, [this follow-up report](#) re-visits seven of the eight original not-for-profit theatres studied and includes a mini-report on two additional organizations selected by TCG.

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Trinity Repertory Company & Spectrum Theatre Ensemble

PROVIDENCE, RI



ENCORE! ENCORE! SPOTLIGHTING TWO ADDITIONAL THEATRES

The original eight **Audience (R)Evolution** case studies described work at theatres selected from various geographic regions and comprised companies of various budget sizes and aesthetics. But our field is a vast and diverse one, with audience engagement and community development taking many different forms at companies across the country. So in the summer of 2018 the TCG leadership selected two additional theatres to add to the pool: Hattiloo Theatre in Memphis, Tennessee; and **Trinity Repertory Company** in Providence, Rhode Island.

During the June 2018 TCG conference, I met with Clay Martin and Troy Battle, who are working in partnership with Trinity Rep to develop a pilot program for professional theatre outreach and social engagement with neurodiverse populations, including individuals on the autism spectrum. This initiative is taking place both at Trinity Rep and through a young company they helped establish called Spectrum Theatre Ensemble. I also spoke with Trinity Rep's Associate Artistic Director Tyler Dobrowsky by phone from Providence.

What follows is a look at some of the strategies this company has brought to bear in approaching community development and audience engagement in working with a specific population subset.

CASE STUDY

For more than a decade, Trinity Rep has welcomed neurodiverse audiences, including people who have autism spectrum disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other cognitive conditions. The theatre has long offered acting classes, sensory-friendly performances of its Christmas show, and other programs for this population. But in recent years the company has sought to more broadly engage neurodiverse communities within and beyond the Providence area, both as audience members and as theatre-makers.

With an annual budget of \$10 million, Trinity Rep is Rhode Island's largest arts organization. The theatre's mission is "to reinvent the public square with dramatic art that stimulates, educates and engages our diverse community in a continuing dialogue." The company provides "eclectic, bold and original theatre...through nationally recognized stage productions, a professional resident acting company, graduate training programs offered in partnership with Brown University, lifelong learning opportunities, and arts education programs that reach students in grades K-12."

In 2016 the company received a TCG Leadership U[niversity] grant supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The funding supported a mentorship for Clay Martin, a visionary rising leader in the theatre field, to develop a pilot program for professional theatre outreach and social engagement. As Trinity's Artistic Leadership/Inclusion Fellow and under the mentorship of Director of Education Jordan Butterfield, Martin set out to build on the theatre's existing groundwork in K-12 autism outreach, as well as his own experiences founding an educational theatre initiative involving adults on the autism spectrum.

The following year Martin joined with a diverse group of Providence-based theatre artists, both neurotypical and on the autism spectrum, to found Spectrum Theatre Ensemble (STE). Spectrum's mission is "to evolve the tools, practitioners, and awareness necessary to empower those who struggle to make themselves heard." By producing relevant and high-quality productions and workshops, STE aims to engage both artists and audience to develop social skills, empathy, and understanding, and to spread the message of inclusion.

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This section discusses Trinity Rep's work in this area, as well as its collaboration with STE, based on my conversation with Martin and Troy Battle, who has been assisting Martin in this work; and with Tyler Dobrowsky, Trinity Rep's associate artistic director, by phone the following month. I have identified the following strategies that inform this work:

Strategy 1 - Offer sensory-friendly performances of every mainstage production to welcome and serve neurodiverse audiences.

Strategy 2 - Establish a nationally-recognized rating system that Trinity Rep and other theatre companies can use to guide and inform neurodiverse audiences.

Strategy 3 - Empower and support adults who are on the Autism Spectrum and other neuroatypical individuals to create theatre.

Of the five Audience Engagement Strategy Clusters developed by AMS Planning & Research as part of the original **Audience (R)Evolution** overall research effort (see "Research Approach" in the [2013 case studies](#)), those in alignment with Trinity Rep/STE's efforts were Segment (#1, #2, and #3 above) and Relationship (#1 and #3, above).

STRATEGY 1

Offer sensory-friendly performances of every Trinity Rep mainstage production to welcome and serve neurodiverse audiences.

It has been a longstanding tradition of Trinity Rep to offer sensory-friendly performances of the company's annual Christmas show, a staging of *A Christmas Carol*. The theatre promotes the show as "New England's favorite family holiday tradition," and welcomes audiences of all ages. It's a terrific experience for children, but, as Clay Martin puts it, "kids on the autism spectrum grow up. They become adults on the autism spectrum. They don't want to just keep seeing *A Christmas Carol*. They also want to see *Death of a Salesman*."

Trinity Rep brought Martin on board in part to develop a pilot program that would extend sensory-friendly performances to all of Trinity Rep mainstage productions, not just the annual children's show. "We wanted to make a sensory-friendly season for adults," Martin says. Engagement with neurodiverse audiences is an "integral plank of Trinity Rep's equity and inclusion work," Associate Artistic Director Tyler Dobrowsky says. "We began asking ourselves, 'How are we welcoming people into this organization?'"

"Theatre is scripted social interaction, so it's ideal for people on the autism spectrum," Martin points out. "We began by asking what is needed, asking people who were experts—people who are on the spectrum." Trinity Rep already had relationships with individuals with autism spectrum disorder through its TRAIN (Trinity Rep's Active Imagination Network) program, which is geared primarily to children. Individuals who have come through the program were looking for the next steps, says Dobrowsky.

Trinity Rep grew its sensory-friendly performance program through experimentation. The company began by using the least-attended performances of the season as test cases, and made adjustments by trial and error. And they made sure to consult with individuals on the autism spectrum and with cognitive issues as they developed this strategy—so that they were curating the theatregoing experience *with* those individuals, and not simply for them.

The most important thing, says Martin, was making sure everyone in the audience has the support they need. He and other staffers check in personally to let audience members know where staff members would be stationed throughout the performance, in case their assistance was needed. They offer tours of the performance space and other public areas

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of the building before the show, so that audience members know what to expect during the performance. And the theatre hired ushers who are on the autism spectrum as part of its permanent front-of-house staff.

At Trinity Rep, there are now two types of performances for interested persons to choose from: "Sensory-friendly" shows are identical to other performances of the run, but might feature a lantern placed discreetly in the theatre to let patrons know when a loud sound or intense lighting cue (such as strobe lights) is about to play, thus giving them the chance to close their eyes or block their ears. The theatre makes sensory-friendly performances available to all of its shows, which can be purchased as a subscription series or individually.

On the other hand, "Sensory-friendly Plus" shows feature modified production elements including sound, lighting and other adjustments. In addition, patrons are invited to make sounds and enter or exit as needed during the performance. The theatre offers these performances, which are designed to meet the needs of both children and adults, for *A Christmas Carol* and selected additional productions. Martin stresses that modified performances work best when the theatre brings the same creativity to bear in making adjustments that goes into any artistic decision-making.

Both types of shows offer trained ushers in the audience to give assistance when necessary, plot synopses available in advance, and a safe space in the lobby for patrons to visit if they need a break from the performance.

Martin and the Trinity Rep team realized that education about the program was essential, so they created a two-sided handout distributed at sensory-friendly performances. One side is intended for audience members on the autism spectrum and those with PTSD, giving them detailed information about what to expect during the performance and within the theatre space. However, the other side provides information intended for neurotypical individuals.

"It's about flipping the script," Martin says. "We're really educating the neurotypical audience members so that they understand what sensory-friendly performances are all about." The handouts give neurotypical theatregoers tools to understand the nature and purpose of sensory-friendly performances, and an explanation for what they might perceive as unusual activity at the show. They become invested in the exercise, and any lingering discomfort and resistance vanishes, Martin says.

Education is the key to making sure *all* patrons have a quality experience, Martin says, and it works. "The disruptive moments are now seen as engaging." He reports that there were no complaints or walkouts from neurotypical patrons during any sensory-friendly performances in the 2017-2018 season.

STRATEGY 2

Establish a nationally-recognized rating system that Trinity Rep and other theatre companies can use to guide and inform neurodiverse audiences.

Many companies offer sensory-friendly performances on a regular or occasional basis—ranging from small, neighborhood theatres to Disney's Broadway blockbusters. What's missing, says Martin, is a standard way of talking about these performances. For many on the spectrum, knowing what to expect when attending a show is the first step to a rewarding experience. To that end, STE is working to codify materials, create a list of best practices, common language and standards, and replicable work. "This is a community that likes structure," Martin's colleague Troy Battle points out.

STE has created a Sensory Friendly Certification (SFC) Program to "develop a codified rating system that allows a neurodiverse audience to fully participate in society" beginning with performing arts events. This work-in-progress is a rating system modeled on the widely-used Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards system for green buildings.

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STE is working on a multi-tiered rating system that Battle explains is 1) adaptive to all spaces and shows; 2) cost-effective for ease of implementation; and that 3) maintains the artistic integrity of the show. In its initial iteration, SFC will encompass two classes of ratings: institutional ratings, which will apply to theatre companies and their venues; and individual ratings, which describe particular shows or performances. Both ratings will be point-based with various levels or tiers. So, for example, a theatre can earn points for including autism awareness inserts in all programs year-round; implementing usher training programs; and offering an on-site sensory-friendly location. A production would be scored on elements such as leaving house lights at 50% during a performance; inclusion of a trigger-warning light; and, once again, offering an on-site sensory-friendly location. The institutional ratings, which are recurring and sustainable, will range from Certified to Silver, Gold, and Platinum. The individual ratings, which can be one-time or recurring, depending on circumstances, will be accompanied by a standardized color-based system, where orange might indicate low score, with blue representing the highest score achievable.

STRATEGY 3

Empower and support adults who are on the Autism Spectrum and other neuroatypical individuals to create theatre.

Because Trinity Rep had long been offering sensory-friendly performances on an annual basis, the theatre already had relationships in Rhode Island's neurodiverse community. However, the relationship was primarily a one-way affair in terms of artistic creation: the theatre made art and the individuals participated as spectators. The company's TRAIN program, though more interactive, was primarily an education initiative for children with different kinds of neurological and physical abilities, with a curriculum centered around skill-building, targeted primarily towards children.

The next step was to explore ways of supporting interested individuals who wanted to make theatre in addition to experiencing it as audience members (Trinity Rep has long collaborated with Brown University in an MFA program, so training is in the company's DNA).

Before he arrived in Providence, Martin was studying in a graduate program at Texas Tech University, where he co-founded The BurkTech Players, a collaboration between the School of Theatre and Dance and the Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research. His Leadership U application, written in collaboration with Education Director Butterfield, laid the groundwork for STE, which was in part an extension of TRAIN.

In 2017 Martin became the driving force behind the newly-formed Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, which describes itself as "a group of theatre artists, both neurotypical and on the autism spectrum...who share a common belief: that the theatre provides a unique venue for the understanding and inclusion of all, and that our society and culture are stronger for it."

The group includes adults on the autism spectrum, as well as professional actors who are neurotypical, some of whom are longtime performers at Trinity Rep. Many of the artists who are part of STE are TRAIN alumni. STE has produced work created by the company, as well as work by Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams. The company also involves members in workshops and staged readings. Its philosophy is articulated on the company's website: "By producing relevant and high-quality productions and workshops, STE aims to engage both artists and audience to develop social skills, empathy, and understanding, and to spread the message of inclusion all over the world." Eventually, their work will extend to teaching theatre workshops elsewhere in the Providence community and beyond.

While STE is independent of Trinity Rep—the group handles its own fundraising under the fiscal sponsorship of Fractured Atlas—it operates under Trinity Rep's umbrella. "Clay was a catalyst," says Dobrowsky. "But he needed parameters.

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He needed help with budgets and planning and identifying resources." The theatre offered support for logistics, marketing, and fundraising—sometimes the companies applied for grants together, and in other cases the Trinity Rep staff passed along leads (and vice versa). Many departments at the theatre got in on the act. Dobrowsky reports that Artistic was able to set aside some new-play development funds for work by or about people on the autism spectrum, and/or that could feature people on the spectrum. The Education Department helped generate materials. The intention is that STE will continue even after Martin's tenure in Providence comes to an end.

"People want to make plays," says Dobrowsky. "Giving people who didn't think they belong in the building a space to create plays is the best way to get them excited about theatre." It's a gift to the organization, he continues. "Find people who were shut out and give them opportunity. That's what makes exciting art."

CHALLENGES

Martin and Dobrowsky identified several perceived obstacles. How to get people in the autism community to know about the work is one; another is how to make sure they know that they can feel safe at Trinity Rep. Fuzziness about terminology can lead to miscommunication and misperception.

Dobrowsky points out that Trinity Rep is a large, established organization that can sometimes be slow to adapt and change. "We can't always be nimble," he says, citing long planning horizons. And communication can be "tricky" among departments. It took time for the theatre to realize that Martin's work with STE was something that needed to live outside of only the artistic and education departments, and would—and needed to—affect the whole organization. Initially, there was uncertainty of "not knowing what this work would look like."

One of the challenges Trinity Rep worked through, according to Dobrowsky, was "not knowing where STE ended and Trinity Rep began." This was managed by "continually setting boundaries," particularly around such activities as fundraising, and overlap of personnel. "It had to be negotiated with care and consideration," Dobrowsky says.

And a perennial concern is keeping programs going when staff changes or grants run their course. One indication that the work in this area will continue beyond Martin's tenure at Trinity Rep is that at least two of the theatre's current staff members are STE participants. Jordan Butterfield also now sits on STE's board.

LESSONS LEARNED

Martin acknowledges that the idea of altering artistic elements of productions for Sensory-friendly Plus performances can be daunting. "Find creative ways of making adjustments," he advises. Begin by asking experts, he advises—trained arts professionals who are on the spectrum. And remember that warning lights can be present in every performance, even when you don't change the light clues.

He also stresses the value of training front-of-house staff about autism and how to serve patrons who are neurologically atypical. Martin asks, "How do you ID someone on the autism spectrum?" The answer: "You can't! So be nice to everyone." And hire individuals who are on the spectrum in front-of-house positions, he says. Find them by asking people on the spectrum to recommend potential staffers. Reach out to transition centers and other social-service resources in your community. And don't just employ them as ushers, Martin says. Hire them to help develop new audiences, and to welcome audiences. Hire them to help create trigger warnings.

Martin says a lot of what he has learned came through trial and error. Try something; if it doesn't work, don't get discouraged. Try something else.

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Martin also stresses the value of clarifying and standardizing terms, so that individuals will know what to expect when they learn about a company's work with neurodiverse populations. "Find the right vocabulary," he says, favoring words that are descriptive rather than pejorative—for example, a useful, non-pejorative way to describe a scene with loud noises, gunshots, and flashing lights is "sensory-intense."

These strategies required an organizational commitment that, Martin says, is broad, but does not have to be deep. It takes resources from the entire company, but is not a big burden. "Curt Columbus, the artistic director, is a big supporter," says Martin. "He never said, 'No'—but, 'Yes, and how can we help?'"

A key element is long-term commitment, Dobrowsky says. "It's a big part of the EDI work that Trinity Rep and other theatres are doing—but it can't be just lip service." He calls out the theatre's long-running TRAIN program and its leader, Jordan Butterfield. Through TRAIN the company created relationships with young people that have continued as they grew into adults.

Says Dobrowsky, this work has "broadened the consciousness of the theatre that we should not be an ableist organization."

I asked Martin for some suggestions he could share with other companies that might want to explore setting up or expanding sensory-friendly performances. Some of his advice:

- Give the audiences trigger warnings—communicate in advance what to expect in terms of trigger events (i.e., gunshots, yelling, other "dramatic" moments). This might take the form of an unobtrusive light at the side of the stage that turns on shortly before a moment of theatrical intensity.
- Give people the systems to let them know they can ask for what they need. For example, invite patrons to raise their hands if they are in distress, knowing that an usher will be available to help them.
- Let them know there is a place in the building they can go if they need to temporarily leave the playing space.
- Make sure people with autism are involved, or hire consultants with experience in working with neurodiverse audiences.
- Hire a neurodiverse cohort of ushers and front-of-house
- "And then," he says, "let folks relax and have fun."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For more information on TCG's **Audience (R)Evolution** program please contact AudienceRev@tcg.org or visit www.tcg.org.

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