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Onstage and Behind the Scenes: Autistic Performance and Advocacy

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ABSTRACT *For many autistic performers in arts and entertainment, the stage can be an important site of self-advocacy and creative expression. Whereas everyday social interactions may be unpredictable, being onstage can allow autistic performers to work from a script and anticipate audience responses. This article explores the affordances and challenges of performance for young autistic adults in Canada through interviews with four autistic performers (two singers and two stand-up comics). While solo performance was the focus, participants discussed the creative employment of diverse media platforms, from the stage to screenwriting and children's books, and emphasized the need for autistic people to be involved in all creative realms. This research follows a Critical Disability Studies (CDS) framework which challenges deficit models of autism (McGuire, 2016), "supercrip" tropes (Clare, 2015, p. 2), and narratives of overcoming autism (Cheng, 2017). While one participant noted being uncomfortable with the sense that they were a source of inspiration for non-autistic audiences, each found it encouraging that autistic audiences relate to their work and might be motivated to participate in similar forms of self-advocacy; in particular, they noted the value of performance in building confidence. As previous CDS literature is wary of disability as spectacle (Darke, 1994), this research provides insight into how young autistic adults use their work onstage and behind the scenes to promote and perform self-advocacy.*

KEYWORDS autistic adovocacy; performance; comedy; media

Introduction: Theatre as Platform

> For a long time, the only way I could be liked by people was by making jokes and being funny. That's still by far the easiest way I can relate to people.
>
> (Jack Hanke, *Asperger's Are Us*, 2016)

> People on the spectrum… sort of feel like an alien being dropped in from outer space, and you can't quite connect properly… Being on stage and making a room

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> full of people laugh, felt like a connection I hadn't been able to establish in any other environment.
>
> (Hannah Gadsby, as cited in Gross, 2020, para. 7)

In the statements above, autistic comedians Jack Hanke and Hannah Gadsby get at the core of what being on the stage can mean for an autistic performer: a highly coveted sense of connection and affirmation of their skills and talents. While often underestimated, autistics can have unique strengths (Arendell, 2015) and perform at very high levels in a variety of artistic forms and venues from televised talent competitions (Cheng, 2017) to classic opera conservatories (Addicott, 2019). In fact, some argue that autistic people are especially well-suited for the arts as they are prone to "creative thinking" and "see the world a bit differently" (Buckley et al., 2020, p. 5). Among other benefits of autism, the autistic comedians and singers interviewed for this article discussed having humorous, outsider perspectives on social interactions, perfect pitch, and a natural ability to mimic vocal presentation. Having access to the stage and training in performance also gives them the opportunity to actively challenge ignorant assumptions about autistic people.

Interviews with four young adult autistic performers, and family members who support their work, indicated that their experience and training in performance (e.g., vocal coaching and improvisation), has helped them gain confidence, which can be especially important for self-advocacy.[1] Participants found that in addition to having a platform for expression, some of the skills built through performance training transferred into their everyday contexts and helped reduce anxiety. They also noted that because performance can be scripted and rehearsed, they are often more comfortable in a performance context than in everyday social interactions with people they do not know, which can be significantly less predictable. Another advantage of the arts is that performers can determine a creative genre and style that works for them. For example, in addition to being "quick and cheap to produce" and often devoid of "the whims and prejudices" of casting directors, one autistic stand-up comedian noted that performing solo rather than with other people leaves less to chance as he does not need to rely on others to get their lines right as with traditional theatrical productions (Sandahl, 2003, p. 29; M. McCreary, research interview, 2019). Another solo performer, who sings and adds autobiographical elements into her

[1] This project was reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (CUREB-A) in June 2019. Study participants are listed below. Actual names of participants are used with their permission:

- Doug McCreary. [21 Aug. 2019]. Phone Interview.
- Michael McCreary. [22 August 2019]. Phone Interview.
- Samantha Mutis and April Mutis. [2 October 2019]. Phone Interview.
- Sara Sobey and Kim Souch. [5 November 2019]. Phone Interview.
- Adam Schwartz. [1 October 2019]. Email Interview.

performances, noted the opportunity to control and play with audience expectations as a way for her to turn them on their head (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019).

Above and beyond enhancing the performance of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1956; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005), the understanding of performance described by interview participants spoke to a model of social justice couched in self-advocacy as performers discussed the broader socio-cultural implications of having an audience and moving beyond "stigma management" to challenge ideals of normalcy (Sandahl, 2003, p. 40; Garland-Thomson, 1997) and normative "aesthetic and social values" (Johnston, 2012, p. 5). As Kirsty Johnston (2012) notes, it is high time for disabled performers to be meaningfully included in theatre and to have their own venues. Disability theatre in Canada follows an activist tradition, and more broadly, shares many intersections and affinities with other forms of activism by marginalized groups (Sandahl, 2003), which have undoubtedly paved the way for emerging autistic performers.

While the past several years have seen a markedly generative period for Canadian disability theatre as national institutions and granting councils have supported new initiatives in line with equity mandates (Sandahl, 2003), accessibility is still a concern in the arts. As Johnston (2012, p. xiv) states,

> Given how often disabled characters and productions involving disability themes arise in theatre, it is unacceptable that inaccessibility remains a problem in professional theatres and training programs. I am far from the first person to take issue with how often disability is and has been mined for pathos and comedy and enacted to demonstrate virtuosity in theatres that do not support people with lived disability experiences to take the stage or sometimes even a place in the audience.

Similarly, while there has been celebratory discourse around performance and autism (Arendell, 2015), there are still some questions worth exploring about the struggles of autistic performers and their unmet access needs. For example, as Buckley et al. (2020) point out, auditions can lead to disproportionate levels of stress for people prone to anxiety, and other production factors like lighting or loud sounds can be difficult or impossible to navigate for people with sensory sensitivities. As previous literature suggests, the idea of the "neutral" (non-disabled, neurotypical, or allistic) actor can also act as a tyranny in actor training, further reinforcing social invisibility (Sandahl, 2005, p. 255). As Sandahl (2003) writes, "many programs are dubious of disabled people's talent or simply do not recognize it" (p. 30). For example, Winnipeg-based autistic comedian Adam Schwartz noted that while he took acting classes, he did not feel he was a success because he has difficulty expressing a range of emotions, which is expected of most actors. He attributes this inability to express emotion to his experiences of bullying as a child (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019). As researchers note, autistic people show an increased risk of experiencing traumatic events such bullying, which can result in Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) (Haruvi-Lamdan et al., 2020) and many, like Schwartz, also experience co-existing conditions like depression. As another barrier to access, it can be very difficult to earn a living wage with contract performing; this compounds with the high rates of unemployment amongst autistic and disabled people more generally (Buckley et al, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2017). In some cases, this led participants to diversify their work into different media forms, for example writing children's books.

Autistic performers may sometimes need to cater to broad audiences to earn a living wage. They may also feel as if they are novelties because of the combination of their autism and impressive abilities. This tokenization of autistic and disabled people in media has been called inspiration porn: where the autistic/disabled body gives neurotypical/able-bodied people feelings of relief and gratitude for their perceived normal status and generosity as a benevolent savior of the less fortunate (Ellcessor, 2017; Young, 2014). This follows longer, ableist tropes seen in popular media, and what autistic comedian Michael McCreary describes as the "neurodivergent inspiration porn genre." As he states, "it's about the arch of the neurotypical character as they come to accept and understand somebody who's different" rather than being about the autistic person themselves (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019). As Mitchell and Snyder (2000) point out, disability is often used as a "narrative prosthesis," or an "opportunistic metaphorical device" upon which dominant narratives are dependent, with the "discursive dependency" on disability as a vehicle for evoking inspiration in non-disabled audiences being a popular and deeply entrenched trope (p. 47).

A prime example of the inspiration porn trope was demonstrated when judges on the show *America's Got Talent* saw a performance by Codi Lee, a blind autistic singer; following the performance, they cried and expressed their shock (Cheng, 2017). Rather than simply acknowledging Lee's talent, the show framed Lee's performance as an "overcoming" of his autism (Cheng, 2017, p. 184). As disability rights activist Stella Young (2014) famously pointed out, such inspiration porn leads to the objectification of disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people (Young, 2014). Another danger of such a narrative trajectory is the misguided notion that autistic and other disabled people can simply "overcome" disabling infrastructures and attitudes in order to gain access to institutions that other people can easily navigate (Cheng, 2017; Clare, 2015).

The existence of these ableist tropes in part stems from the fact that it has traditionally been people who are not disabled who have primarily shaped discourses of disability (Murray, 2008). In particular, Critical Autism Studies notes the struggles between autistic self-advocacy and professional and parent advocacy voices in autistic and autism communities (Brady & Cardin, 2021; McGuire, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). Hollin (2020) notes of the "parental gaze" through which the majority of autism narratives are told: "it isn't just that the stories told are those of parents, it is that we are placed resolutely in the parent's shoes and see things entirely from their perspective" (p. 2). The

dominance of parental discourses and perspectives in popular culture make clear the need for a centring of autistic perspectives while encouraging mediated kinships amongst disabled and neurodivergent people beyond the family unit (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2016).

A related theme that emerged in interviews reflected the desire for increased independence as autistic performers learn the ropes of performance and reach adulthood. As Michael McCreary jokingly states, "you know, my dad drives me everywhere, you don't gotta remind me that I'm like useless" (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019). But, despite these broader tensions, it was clear that some of the autistic performers interviewed for this chapter have incredibly supportive parents who help their children to develop their talents and dreams. In some cases, parents provided the technical support and coordination for performances, acting as stage managers. Michael's father, Doug, travelled across the country to support Michael's comedy tour, and Sara's mother, Kim, often performs with her daughter and ensures that necessary accommodations are written into contracts. Importantly, such support has helped these performers gain a platform so that they are able to advocate for themselves and address some of the systemic ableism and stereotypes that they have faced.

Overall, each of the performers interviewed found it encouraging that autistic audiences related to their work and might be motivated to participate in similar forms of advocacy; in two cases, the fact that non-autistic people initially underestimated them also added an element of surprise to their performances as they turned ableist assumptions on their head. While not using the term "social justice," performers noted their broader goals of encouraging well-being and a model of self-advocacy for autistic audiences as well as the enjoyment of entertaining as motivation for performing.

A Brief Note on Methods

Following institutional ethics approval, the performers (young autistic adults) interviewed in this piece were identified through snowball sampling, beginning with Michael and Doug McCreary, who the researcher met following a show in Ottawa. Semi-structured Interviews took place during the summer of 2019 over the phone in three cases and via asynchronous communication (email) in one case. In order to make participants feel more comfortable, they were sent questions in advance of the interview and were offered a transcript and the opportunity to revise their comments in cases where interviews took place over the phone. While a larger sample of participants might have expanded on a broader and more diverse range of experiences, the limited focus allowed the researcher to include a more detailed account and profile of each participant. Block quotations are used in several cases to centre participant experiences.

Michael: On Making Awkward Extroversion a Career

> I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at the age of five, and while it can be challenging at times, I wouldn't change the way I am. Cause then I'd be somebody else. If anything, I'd kinda like to change you, so you could have a better understanding.
>
> (M. McCreary, 2016)

Toronto-based comedian Michael McCreary has been performing stand-up since he was 14-years-old. Since that time, he has become one of the best-known comedians in Ontario, and possibly in Canada, to focus on his experiences as a young autistic adult in his sets. In 2019, he embarked on a Canada-wide comedy tour performing in a variety of venues from churches to comedy clubs.

Michael first performed in school plays after seeing his older brother in theatre, and given his extroverted personality, he was a natural. He later received comedy and improvisation training through the Stand-up for Mental Health program in Guelph and subsequently a program for autistic students at Second City in Toronto. Autism is a central topic in his comedy, public speaking engagements, and written work. Importantly, Michael's humour is gently self-deprecating, but it emphasizes how important it is for neurotypicals (or allistics) to better understand and respect autistic people (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019). Ironically, while he has spent a lifetime learning about acceptable social cues and how to avoid problematic dynamics with allistics by understanding how they communicate, he notes that most neurotypical people do very little to learn about autistic people. His shows make this lesson accessible for general audiences without letting them off the hook; humour can be an especially powerful vehicle to challenge ableism without seeming too didactic (Sandahl, 2003). As Hannah Gadsby has pointed out, it can be dangerous in comedy when the most marginalized of people become the butt of their own jokes (Valentish, 2020). Gadsby, like Michael, has learned to turn the lens back on neurotypicals while treating themselves with more compassion as she demonstrated in her 2020 comedy special *Douglas* (Gross, 2020).

Like many autistic people, Michael experienced bullying and loneliness as a child. Because some autistic people can be trusting and fail to recognize nefarious intentions operating below the surface, they can misunderstand that they are in an abusive dynamic with others in which they are the targets. After coming to this realization as a youth, Michael distanced himself from an unhealthy social group and turned to writing, theatre, and eventually comedy (McCreary, as cited in CBC, 2016). As he journaled, he was able to not only process his experiences, but recognize humour in his unfortunate circumstances, for example, how ridiculous and insecure his bullies were. In addition to sticking up for himself, he also learned to defend other autistic students, with one of his first jokes on the schoolyard being a "yo mama"

joke used to deflate a bully (McCreary, 2019). For him, learning performance skills was an important part of self-advocacy. As he explains:

> Oh yeah sure, I don't think about it [performance training] in term of conditioning… like here's how you act 'normal,' performance skills are good for self-advocacy. You're like hey, I know this is wrong, or people have put me in a position that makes me feel bad, how do I articulate that, how do I take control of the situation? How do I get out of there? How do I be assertive? I think that's such a great avenue for it. I remember Second City launched a program for teens on the spectrum, that I thought was really groovy… improv encourages you to not only anticipate radical change on a moment to moment's basis, it lets you not be scared of it. In fact, it kind of makes it exciting, and that to me, is how it felt. Even though I don't do improv, and it's not my ideal style of performing, it wasn't my favourite thing to do, but I felt it was invaluable for transferrable skills…That was why so many kids, who were my friends who had ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] loved drama in high school, cause they were like, wow here's a forum where I could actually… where I could feel like I'm getting something out of it socially. That helps me articulate where I'm at. (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019)

Self-advocacy is especially important because the construction of autism in popular culture most frequently comes from the perspective of people who are not autistic (allistic). When interviewed, Michael disclosed that he believes most people's perceptions of autism are formed by film and television, but it is not just the characters themselves that are problematic when it comes to the construction of autism in popular culture. As he states, autistics should be included in every part of every production in the entertainment industry in order to normalize autistic experiences so that they do not just become "a checklist of characteristics." As he states:

> That's what happens when you have exclusively neurotypical writers or producers, or whatever… whoever they may be… writing characters that are not part of their life experience. To me, I think the best thing that they could have is not only autistic people in the writer's room contributing to the characterization of a cast or character, but I think what we need is them involved in every facet of production… pre-production, production, post-production whatever. (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019)

This lived experience need not be directly translated into autistic characters, and importantly, Michael points out that some of his favourite characters are ones that are not overtly cast as autistic, but who he can read, or interpret, in that way. Moreover, he finds it important for shows to get past the idea of having a singular autistic character and making the show all about that. If more autistic people were involved in creative production, autism would be more normalized, and plots would not need to revolve around autism itself, it would just implicitly be understood (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019).

In order to be welcoming to autistic people, the industry must seriously consider accessibility concerns, and as previously discussed (Buckley et al., 2020), performing arts in general can be difficult to navigate. In particular, comedy, which has a long history and culture of "toxic masculinity," can be brutal for autistic people amongst other equity seeking groups, such as women, queer, and transgender people (Gadsby, as cited in Valentish, 2020). However, unlike Hannah Gadsby, who had a late diagnosis and only began focusing on autism in her shows in 2019/2020, McCreary's audiences are communities who are often familiar with autism. One upside to having this speciality is that many of the hosts who invite him often "get" his access concerns, though this can vary from site to site.

Michael points out the benefits of show producers being flexible in letting performers prepare for a set, even if their methods for doing this can be a departure from the norm. Although his experiences have been mostly good, he notes that in entertainment in general, performers are expected to be conditioned to perform when and where producers expect them:

> I think there is something kind of scary in entertainment, and I think this goes beyond being on the spectrum, and is more about neurodivergences or even about people with psychological variations where they go like, hey, can I like take a break… and not take a break from this long term, but hey, I need to just go off and do this thing… we are so conditioned to go, like okay, you're waiting in the wings to go on. Where I go, I know what's going on, I know how long everything is, can I just go pace out in the hall because that's how I do my thing. (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019)

Before a show Michael goes through a process which generally involves pacing by himself in a quiet space. During this time, he identified that he would like to be left to his process, rather than being shepherded or infantilized. At the crux of this is respecting his autonomy and access concerns and assuming that he is going to "bring it" as an experienced professional (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019).

Samantha: On Classical Training and Upending Expectations

> When I'm singing, I feel happier than I normally am, especially when I'm in my bedroom singing to a playlist… and also in front of a big audience. I really like that because I feel I can actually have people pay attention to me for once [laughing].
>
> (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019)

Samantha first knew she wanted to be a professional singer at age 11 when she saw the talent competition show *American Idol*. She had been performing in school choir since the age of eight, but she describes her exposure to *American Idol* as a key point in her life: "And I thought, 'That could be me.'

And I fell in love with it. I got really serious, and I actually got voice lessons for my 12th birthday, so that's kind of where it all started." Growing up, Samantha looked up to singers like Kelly Clarkson and Avril Lavigne. Little did she know, she would eventually have the opportunity to audition for the show *Canadian Idol*, even making it past the first round of cuts (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019).

Samantha's mother, April, believes that Samantha's penchant for music actually started much earlier, even beginning while in utero. As a child, starting at 18 months she had a knack for impersonating accents and the styles of singers like Judy Garland, "and I mean *just* like Judy Garland because she was such an incredible mimic that she could sing just like Judy Garland." This sometimes evoked laughter or surprise, but for Samantha, "she realized it helped her to sort of be included. And, same with all music." While Samantha was praised for her musical talents, singing "at a level different than everyone else" her age, social interactions came much less easily (A. Mutis, research interview, 2019).

As an autistic adult who also struggles with severe social anxiety, Samantha notes that she finds comfort in the predictability that comes with performance, and in turn, her training has also helped her feel more at home in social interactions. Samantha's smooth and composed public speaking engagements and poised singing were cultivated over many years of vocal training as a youth and later honed in her formal musical training at the University of Toronto, where she focused on jazz (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019).

However, despite the benefits of coaching, university was not easy for Samantha, especially in her second year, just prior to her diagnosis with an anxiety disorder. As with many university students, that period of young adulthood was tumultuous, and the pressures of her competitive program combined with her autism and co-existing conditions sometimes sent her spiraling.

> I would have a performance test, and I would be so nervous, I would be sweating and shaking, but then after the performance, I would still be shaking and convulsing and all that stuff, and I think it's because I felt such high pressure, so much was expected from all my teachers and stuff. And, I was going through a lot of personal stuff as well. A lot of family issues, just trying to balance all my course load, and family issues, and relationships, yeah, it was intense. (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019)

Better understanding her anxiety disorder was one helpful way of constructively addressing her stress. Another was to carefully plan and script presentations and performances down to the last detail. As a young woman, Samantha started giving presentations about her experiences with autism that generally had a musical component, and preparation was paramount. As Samantha states:

> The challenges, sometimes my speech freezes or I stutter, so that made me really have to script everything to a T in my speeches. As I got older I did start to substitute certain words for others, every now and then in my speeches, but when I was younger, I had to stick exactly to a script because I would either freeze or say something inappropriate… or freak out, and that also is a real challenge for me… another for me is extreme social anxiety, constantly feeling that you're going to be judged just for something that you did that you were not necessarily aware of… that you did. (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019)

In addition to years of practice learning poise as a singer, Samantha, like Michael, had the opportunity to take improvisation training. She also went through a program designed specifically for autistic performers through Second City in Toronto. Samantha explains how both training in performance as a singer and improvisation have helped in different but complimentary ways:

> My basic understanding of human behavior and life skills actually really improved through improv. But then, through singing, I learned how to present myself in a professional way. How to carry yourself, how to prepare for these performances, and that learning that a little bit of nerves are a good thing. (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019)

Like Michael, Samantha noted that most of the venues where she has performed have been accessible, because she generally performs at autism-related events. She has also had family supports, with her mother acting as stage manager to ensure access needs, lighting, and sound are accounted for in advance of a performance. However, simple considerations for accommodation can also go a long way. For example, Samantha finds it very important to have a podium on which she can plan to rest her notes or presentation roadmap. Moreover, like Michael, Samantha pointed out one area that is sometimes lacking: green rooms, or private areas to spend time preparing before a performance. This quiet space can be especially important for autistic performers, and in Samantha's case, someone with a severe social anxiety disorder. As Samantha states:

> In my opinion, the one thing that a lot of performance spaces were good with but others were not was providing like a green room area, sort of a quiet green room area that performers could go in to warm up, to decompress a little bit, and sort of get in the zone… The one thing that I was often very concerned about was people hearing me warm up. (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019)

According to Samantha, the green room also helps keep her "abilities under wraps until getting on stage." In this comment, Samantha points to the ways in which such spaces can help autistic performers prepare, and also alludes to the perception that audiences sometimes underestimate her, which she in turn uses as an element of surprise.

In addition to sometimes being underestimated by allistic audiences, Samantha explains that parents sometimes have emotional responses to her performances. This makes her uncomfortable, in part, because of popular media depictions of autism as tragic. One example Samantha described as disliking the most was the 2006/2007 Autism Speaks ad campaign. As she describes the ad:

> There was one of the mothers who said in that video she contemplated taking herself and her autistic child and driving off a bridge into the water in that video. I was thinking, "How can you do that?" Like I understand autism is frustrating, but there's just something wrong with that. (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019)

This ad campaign reproduced what McGuire (2016) refers to as normalized violence against autistics and privileged the perspectives of mothers rather than self-advocates. As Samantha suggests, it seemed to her that the mothers in the ad were complaining about how difficult it was having autistic children. This discourse of tragedy around autism in combination with the treatment of autistic performers as objects of inspiration makes for an uncomfortable mix.

Despite her impressive performances, Samantha reports an aversion to flattery in general and discomfort when parents approach and compliment her after a presentation "crying happy tears" (S. Mutis, research interview, 2019). Some parents may feel a sense of optimism that their children could accomplish the things that Samantha has accomplished, but for her, this seems to reveal parental doubt of their children's potential, and by extension, the potential of all autistic people. While disturbed by these reactions Samantha indicates that being onstage allows her to play on and disrupt such ableist tropes and centre her own experience.

Adam: On Media Platforms and Making a Living

> But the most awkward part of the gym has got to be the men's locker room. Let me just say that sometimes it's okay to be naked, such as the bedroom with the lights off and your socks on. The strip club, if you're the stripper. And the shower. Otherwise, you should never be naked for more than three Mississippis.
>
> (Adam Schwartz, Rumours Comedy Club, Winnipeg, n.d.)

Adam Schwartz identifies primarily as a comedian. As he joked in our email interview, "I've always had people laughing with me and more likely at me, therefore I thought I'd be a natural" (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019). With his deadpan delivery and gentle cadence, Adam's humour sometimes sneaks up on audiences. Just when they think he is naïve, he exhibits his edge, often accompanied by a bit of a dirty joke.

Adam is a seasoned performer with a knack for producing original material. Although his shows are funny, the Winnipeg-based comedian also

taps into his own sometimes painful experiences as material for his shows, with dating being one of his favourite topics. He explains that having desire and a relationship are things that most people want, including young autistic adults: "we all want to be loved, and many people – autistics and neuros – struggle with finding meaningful relationships" (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019). Therefore, Schwartz is also addressing a deep sentiment that is relatable across audiences. However, despite Adam's efforts to play on universal themes, he sometimes struggles to appeal to wide audiences. As he states:

> My biggest problem is getting gigs. I have a hard time getting people out, and since I'm not the most charismatic, people prefer to put other comedians in their show, take them on the road with them. There are not enough autistic performers that we can create our own shows. (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019)

As mentioned earlier, Schwartz attributes his inability to demonstrate a range of emotions to bullying he experienced as a child (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019). This illustrates a broader problem pointed out by disability studies scholars and media makers (Ellcessor, 2017), where disabled performers are generally allocated one so-called diversity part rather than appearing based on their various styles and talents.[2]

In an effort to broaden his audience, Adam decided to try different performance and media platforms. He tried his hand at a book for adults, *I've Got Asperger's, so I'm Better than You… Shhhh Don't tell Mom*, the title coming from a joke that got laughs in his show (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019). He also began writing children's literature like *Jonathan and the Big Barbecue* and *No School Today*. Working with a local non-profit, Inspire Community, Adam also adapted his children's book, *Anna and the Substitute Teacher* (Schwartz, 2018) into a stage play. In the book, the protagonist, saves her classmates from a sinister substitute teacher with her autistic super-power (her avoidance of eye-contact with the teacher, who appears to be a Medusa-like figure that locks the children in the closet after freezing them with her gaze). Adam notes that he developed Anna as a female protagonist because autistic girls are underrepresented in popular culture. As he states, "women on the spectrum are often not believed, as autism is seen as a male thing. Being able to blend in and not get the supports can also lead to lots of unhappiness, being unable to be yourself" (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019).

Schwartz's screenplay was performed at the Winnipeg and Edmonton Fringe Festivals in 2019. Though written for a family audience, it also

[2] In the online show *My Gimpy Life* (created by Teal Sherer), this scenario plays out in a humorous manner as the main character, Teal, an aspiring actress who is a wheelchair user, competes for such parts with her nemesis, a dwarf also named Teale (played by Teale Sperling) (Two Shades of Teal, 2012). As Adam indicates, the real implication of token diversity parts is to set up competition within disadvantaged groups.

featured some of Adam's irreverent edge. According to one reviewer, "Anna's frustrations felt genuine and familiar – AND as well as being generally heartwarming, there are a number of quite funny moments, including an increasingly drunken principal on the P.A. and a hilariously sudden announcement of someone having to poop" (Griwkowsky, 2019; emphasis in original).

When asked about the differences between writing for stand up and for a family audience, Schwartz jokes that his adult comedy is mostly for "a drunker audience at the bar," and his children's materials convey positive messages about autism (A.Schwartz, research interview, 2019). Jokes aside, Schwartz notes the serious need for these messages: "my children's books are about creating for kids the message that it's our difference that make us great and that we are stronger as a result of them" (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019). He also notes that while he was happy to develop such a positive character, he also did this out of necessity to try to create new revenue streams for himself as a struggling artist. Adam's versatility in traversing different media and performance genres demonstrates the great potential of having autistic creative workers at every point in production, both onstage and behind the scenes. Across media platforms, Adam's material, silly, edgy, and deeply soulful, reflects not only his lived experience, but touches on the universal struggles of his audiences.

Sara: On Respecting Your Audience

> Well, sometimes I have plausible dreams that I might get nominated for an Oscar.
> (S. Sobey, research interview, 2019)

Sara started singing as a toddler, before she could speak, and by the time she was eight, she knew she wanted to perform. As her mother, Kim, explains, Sara did not have a lot of language as a small child, but was always interested in music. As she recounts, laughing, "I basically handed her the microphone, and she was off to the races" (K. Souch & S. Sobey, research interview, 2019).

Sara's natural talent was refined through music lessons with her mother, who is also a talented musician. Together, Kim and Sara make up the singing duo, KiSara. Sara has performed for a variety of audiences from school visits to singing the national anthem at Toronto's Rogers Centre for a Blue Jays' professional baseball game. Both Sara and her mom explain that one of the benefits of singing is that it provides a social connection with other people; whereas verbal communication can be challenging, Sara can express her creativity and emotion onstage. Some of Sara's favourite artists are Michael Buble and Celine Dion, and she especially loves symphonic performances. In May 2018, her dream of performing with an ensemble came true when she was accompanied onstage by the Stratford Symphony Orchestra, singing

"Possibilities," written by her mother, and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," a duo with singer Donna Bennett.[3]

In addition to her singing, animation and fanfiction screenwriting are Sara's other passions and sources of social connection. In particular, she finds that knowing a lot about animated films and how they are produced is a good way to connect with people. In our interview, Sara described that she identified autistic characters in stories, films, TV shows, and more: some characters overtly autistic, and others read as autistic – characters who can appear to be autistic, especially identified by autistic audiences. For example, Sara postulated autistic characters such as "Bartok from *Anastasia*, and Darkwing Duck, and The Grinch… and, there's some theories that Sponge Bob Square Pants might have autism too …and Pearl from Steve and the Universe as well" (S. Sobey, research interview, 2019).

Sara loves writing prequels and sequels of films including her favorite characters like *The Cat in the Hat* and *The Grinch who Stole Christmas*. One that she is currently writing is a follow-up to a short animation that aired in 1981, called *The Grinch Grinches The Cat in the Hat*. Certainly, this little-known knowledge of an animated short that aired 40 years ago is the sign of a true fan! As Sara explains, "so the sequel I wrote is an adaptation of that much longer and more developed characters. But, the characters are more developed and more consistent to the first" (S. Sobey, research interview, 2019). While not always a central motif, Sara tries to work autism themes into her rewrites. She has tried her hand at graphic novels and likes to draw illustrations, but she prefers to stick to long-form script writing.[4]

Writing provides an important outlet for Sara and a way to express both her struggles and creativity. She is also keenly aware that potential readers may be other autistic people who have similar experiences, and she takes very seriously "respecting your audience" through good character development, visuals, and a story that authentically portrays emotions, because, as Sara explains, "I understand emotions… How it's good to have some sadness in your life. Rather than just blocking it to try to be happy for everyone" (S. Sobey, research interview, 2019). While she writes largely for herself, she also pictures her audience in this way:

> Yes, someone who struggles with self-esteem and some depression and struggling to be happy. And someone with identity… and it could help them be themselves, and realize it's okay to have a disability. It's okay to cry sometimes, even if it hurts sometimes. (S. Sobey, research interview, 2019)

[3] Like Michael and Samantha, Sara emphasizes the importance of what she calls "retreat spaces" (what Samantha called "green rooms") before performances. As someone with sound sensitivity, Sara has found that wearing headphones and listening to her music in places with lots of "random" noises helps her prepare for sets and she also uses "buffer" items like her phone, books, or puzzles to help her to focus and to block out overwhelming noises.

[4] See Sara Sobey's manuscript in this issue, where the persecution of the Grinch and his family by the Whos is an analogy for the abuse of autistic people.

While scriptwriting is important to Sara on many levels, she is both "nervous" and excited for her ultimate dream to come true – that someone in the entertainment industry will pick up and produce one of her scripts. As Kim explains, "Oh yeah, I understand that! Being an artist is always nerve wracking when you're putting your work out there" (S. Sobey & K. Souch, research interview, 2019). But, it is clear that creativity is kinetic for both Kim and Sara, and they explain what it's like when they're both full of energy and new ideas. Sara explains "I'm a pacer," and this both helps her calm down when she is stressed and is something she does when she is "excited about something" like "new ideas for… stories." Kim, warned, "watch out in our hallways if we're both on the move at the same time!" as it may result in "Bumper cars!" (S. Sobey & K. Souch, research interview, 2019).

In reflecting on Michael's comments and those made by other contributors throughout this special issue, it is essential to consider how autistic creatives make contributions not only onstage but behind the scenes in other creative realms. As Sara notes, while autistic audiences have told her how much her performances onstage have impacted them, "I'm hoping it would do the same thing with my story writing too" (S. Sobey, research interview, 2019).

Conclusions

Interviews with Canadian autistic performers Michael McCreary, Samantha Mutis, Adam Schwartz, and Sara Sobey demonstrated how important it is for autistic people to participate at all levels of performance and production, from the stage to behind the scenes, writing "what they know" (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019). Being on the stage and writing their experiences into stories is not just an important opportunity for creative expression, it can be one of the unique opportunities where autistic performers and writers feel a genuine connection with an audience and have an opportunity to be heard. This kind of platform and training for self-advocacy and advocacy for others is essential to social justice for meaningful inclusion. This is not unlike the performance of disability onstage discussed by Sandahl and Auslander (2005) in the book *Bodies in Commotion*; they say, "such performances are forums for profoundly liberating assertions and representations of the self in which the artist controls the terms of the encounter," where such "artistic engagement with self-display is a medium for social critique and positive identity politics" (p. 34).

It was clear in interviews with autistic performers that their art forms are largely for them and for their own creative inspiration. However, they also noted the importance of positive messages and self-determination for autistic audiences, and they used their platforms to disrupt expectations about autism for those who are not autistic. This is especially important given the paradigm

where discourses of autism have primarily been dictated through the parental gaze and medical models (Hollin, 2020).

Moreover, as Adam and Sara use different media to tell their stories, there may be more affordances to expand to new audiences and to adapt the dominant narratives and centre them on autistic experiences. However, considerations of current economic conditions should not be understated as there is a strong relationship between disability and economic disparity.[5] As Adam made clear, his decision to diversify the media in which he works was partly motivated by economic need.

It is often up to disabled people in Canada to self-advocate for their rights. Even when employers comply, or meet the minimum basic standards of legislation like the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, this may not actually provide adequate access concerns for autistics who may have unique access needs. Although the performers interviewed for this article had developed a number of clever coping methods to help them prepare for performances, they all identified areas where performance venues could be more accessible through simple measures like private green room or retreat spaces.

While making performance venues accessible for autistic performers is "not something like comedy clubs just need a ramp for wheelchairs" (A. Schwartz, research interview, 2019), the need for greenrooms or quiet spaces was emphasized by Michael, Samantha, and Sara. Such spaces can be essential to help performers manage sensory sensitivities and anxiety. Moreover, allowing autistic performers to prepare to go on stage in ways that make them comfortable can be important, even if those vary from methods used by allistic performers (e.g., if performers stim or pace outside in the halls rather than quietly "waiting in the wings") (M. McCreary, research interview, 2019). Allowing support people to accompany can also be helpful as it is hard to predict whether there will be overwhelming stimuli as performers enter new spaces, and these as well as other buffers can help with navigating challenging venues.

Even small access considerations can help mitigate the tyranny of the neutral performer (Sandahl, 2005). Considering the substantial effort and adaptability that autistic performers exhibit, such minor considerations seem a small price to pay for the remarkable creativity that they bring to the stage. Significant structural changes could go even further. They could encourage autistic advocacy onstage and in the media, make the performance economy more accessible and adaptable to all performers, and help dismantle widespread ableist beliefs.

[5]As Statistics Canada (2017) notes, most people will experience some form of disability in their lifetime, and 22% (6.2 million) Canadians are currently disabled. Of those, 40% say it has limited their job options. Canadians with disabilities earn 44% less and are more likely to live in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2017).

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