

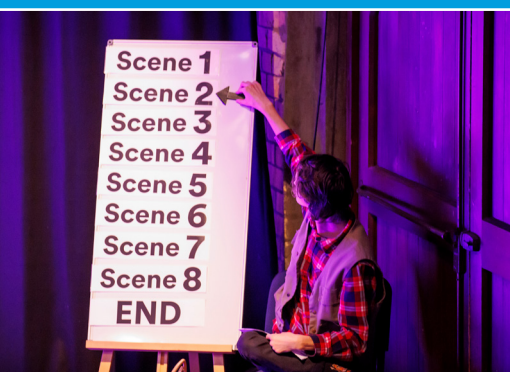


Sensory Relaxed Performances for Children

Learnings from Tim Bray Theatre Company

by Katie Querin

www.timbray.org.nz



Photos by David Rowland / One-Image.com

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About the Author

After learning that a young autistic boy had struggled with volume during a Tim Bray Theatre Company (TBTC) show she was stage managing, Katie Querin (Company Stage Manager / Access and Inclusion Support TBTC) proposed sensory relaxed performances as part of the TBTC offerings. Katie designed the concept and resources for the programme, combining learnings from many others with her own experience with theatre. Katie is autistic herself and would have loved to have had shows like this available as a child. She has been the programme provider for each sensory relaxed show since the debut performance in 2019. Katie hopes that this handbook will help theatres see the value in providing accessible and inclusive theatre to all and will provide them with a guide to get there.



Introduction

A 30+ Year History

Tim Bray Theatre Company is recognised as Auckland’s leading theatre company for children and is one of New Zealand’s oldest professional theatre companies.

Producing high-quality professional theatre for children, our productions attract an annual audience attendance of over 25,000 children and their teachers, parents, caregivers, and grandparents. We typically present four productions per year, most usually based on well-known New Zealand children’s literature.

Our purpose is to inspire children and young people of all backgrounds and abilities to be confident and creative through New Zealand theatre. The company was established by Tim Bray, QSM, in 1991 when the Auckland Youth Theatre closed its doors and Tim (who had been a student of AYT since 1977 and later a teacher and director there) took over the lease of the premises in Lower Greys Ave, now home to the Basement Theatre. Tim Bray was awarded the Queen’s Service Medal for services to children and theatre in 2017.

The company is passionate about arts accessibility and our arts access programmes include NZ Sign Language interpreted performances (since 2004), audio-described performances (since 2015), and sensory relaxed performances (since 2019). Our outreach programme, *Gift a Seat*[™], encourages donations from audience members and funders that allow us to provide free tickets for children from schools who apply for support: Ko Taku Reo Deaf Education, BLENNZ (Blind and Low Vision Education Network of NZ) and Make-A-Wish (NZ).

The company was awarded the Arts Access Creative New Zealand Arts For All Award in 2020. Having provided NZSL-interpreted theatre performances to children since 2004, the judges described Tim Bray Theatre Company as a pioneer in accessibility. “We applaud the company’s long-term commitment to accessibility, the care and attention to detail in its work, its generosity in sharing its knowledge with others and, importantly, the fact it has an accessibility policy to drive its outstanding, pioneering work in making theatre more accessible to deaf and disabled children and their families.”

Language we use

Throughout this handbook, we use the terms ‘neurodiverse’ and ‘neurodivergent’. While similar, these terms differ in meaning and usage. Neurodivergent refers to the neurology of an individual that is not typical. In other words, neurodivergent people may think, learn, or behave in ways considered not typical. ‘Typical’ is what most often occurs in any circumstance or situation. Neurotypical refers to the neurology of an individual that is typical and can be seen as the opposite of neurodivergent. Some examples of neurodivergence:

- Autism
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
- Tourette’s Syndrome
- Dyslexia

Neurodiverse refers to a group of people, of which some individuals are neurodivergent. An individual person cannot be diverse, but a group of people made up of both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals can be neurodiverse.

Language is always changing and evolving. You or your friends, families, and co-workers may use language that differs from what is used in this handbook. It is important to respect the language preferences of the groups or individuals you are connecting with and to keep yourself updated on the preferred language. When in doubt, ask. Our language usage in this handbook has been reviewed by autistic and neurodivergent people and by professionals, and this handbook's author is autistic. We strive to use the correct terms and stay current as terms change.

How we developed sensory relaxed performances

Accessibility has been a cornerstone of our shows for many years and is firmly a part of our company's values. We were the first company in Aotearoa to offer New Zealand sign language interpreted performances in 2004. We first learned about sensory relaxed theatre performances at the Imagine Festival in Edinburgh and began development on our own sensory relaxed shows in 2019. Six months of research and development included meetings with autism professionals, performers with experience in relaxed theatre, creatives putting on other relaxed programmes, and parents of autistic and neurodivergent children, and dozens of emails and video calls to theatres, organisations, and practitioners from the USA, UK, Australia, and New Zealand to develop the core design for the performance.

Sensory relaxed performances are now a regular offering during our school holiday and school term performances, and we currently offer the sessions at three venues in Auckland.

We have been inundated with feedback from parents who report the joy, freedom and acceptance they and their children experience when attending sensory relaxed theatre. The atmosphere of acceptance means their families can participate with ease and dignity, joining in equally and completely. This experience stands in contrast with experiences where they struggled with the stress of being judged when their neurodivergent child behaved differently in public. The sensory relaxed performance creates a unique place where it is acceptable to move around, call out and be yourself, and no one has to worry that they or their child will be criticised.

Inspired by our sensory relaxed performances, in early 2021 we launched *Extraordinarily Creative*, an afterschool drama programme for autistic and neurodivergent children and teenagers to find their own voice and place. There is a clear need in Auckland to create experiences for neurodivergent children, and our audience size and class attendance have been growing steadily. We have expanded into a second venue for *Extraordinarily Creative* to keep up with the high demand for the classes.

This need for accessible theatre exists across the country. We have written this handbook to assist other theatres and performance venues in creating sensory relaxed shows and events. While there is certainly a need for sensory relaxed events for adults, the focus of this handbook is specifically sensory relaxed theatre performances for children because that is where our experience lies. However, our sensory relaxed shows are attended by neurodivergent teens and adults who come to the show for their own enjoyment or with other family members.

In the pages of this handbook, you will find methods and tactics for adapting your shows and events to meet the needs of a widely neurodiverse community. Collaboration and research from theatres in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand, advice from autistic and neurodivergent people, community members, professionals and accessibility advisors, and practical experience from putting on sensory relaxed performances are all combined into one resource to help you create your own sensory relaxed event. Each performing arts company and venue will have different ways of presenting their sensory relaxed performance, and the information available here should be viewed as a tool kit for constructing your unique performance.

Chapter 1

What is a sensory relaxed performance?

Definition of a sensory relaxed performance

A live theatre performance can be a magical, imaginative experience that jump-starts creativity and stokes inspiration. Everyone has the right to experience the joys of theatre, and the goal of sensory relaxed performances is to help make a wonderful theatre experience accessible for everyone.

Sensory relaxed performances offer an accepting, supportive atmosphere where everyone can feel comfortable being and expressing themselves just as they are. This type of show takes the sensitivities of people into consideration. Some people may struggle with the conventions of a traditional theatregoing experience, such as the need to sit still and quietly in a dark theatre for a long time and would be more comfortable attending a sensory relaxed performance. It is a thoughtful approach to presenting the same performance in an inclusive manner.

What is different about a sensory relaxed performance?

During Tim Bray Theatre Company's sensory relaxed performances, talking, laughing, vocalising, and moving around are all welcome. The audience is free to stand up, walk around, and come and go throughout the performance. Some technical changes, such as keeping audience doors open, having audience lights remain on low, and lowering sound levels will consider sensory sensitives. Support materials, such as a welcome video introducing the theatregoing experience and a story summary explaining what will happen in the show, are available before the performance. A complete list of support materials and the technical alterations available for a sensory relaxed performance will be discussed in later chapters.

The most important aspect of a sensory relaxed performance is that everyone participating in the show experience, including the audience, actors, backstage crew, and front-of-house team, is each responsible for making the show 'relaxed' and welcoming. Everyone taking part in the show should understand that a sensory relaxed performance is all about inclusion and acceptance. Everyone knows that there may be more movement and noise during the show - and that it is perfectly all right. Everyone is invited to relax and express themselves as they need to, without worrying about distracting or bothering others because everyone agrees to be themselves and to enjoy the experience together.

Why should your theatre put on a sensory relaxed performance?

Sensory relaxed performances are a way to expand your audience base and reach new theatregoers. Additionally, a sensory relaxed performance may offer an accessibility pathway that was previously closed to a person or their family. Many people who would find it difficult to attend a standard performance would benefit hugely from some simple, low-cost modifications, and we have seen that our sensory relaxed performances have attracted new audience members. We have also learned that we have held on to audience members who were on the verge of giving up on our standard performances, as the stress of attending the standard show was too much.

A sensory relaxed performance is a safe place to be yourself, to express yourself freely and to feel comfortable knowing that no one will criticise or judge. Everyone is different and has individual needs. Rather than setting the bar at pleasing every individual, your focus can be on working within your capabilities and collaborating with your community to put on the most inclusive performance possible. Striving for equal access offers more people the opportunity to experience the joys of live theatre.

Chapter 2

Sensory relaxed performances in New Zealand

Origin of sensory relaxed performances

Relaxed events have been gaining steadily in popularity since the first stirrings of the movement in the 1990s. Relaxed cinema screenings and stadium events have become more commonplace in response to the need for more accessible and sensory-friendly events. Tesco, the major British supermarket chain, introduced a relaxed checkout line inspired by a dementia awareness session at the store. The laid-back checkout line encourages patrons to take their time while paying for their groceries and feel free to ask questions or move at their own pace. The Autism Theatre Initiative in the USA launched the first autism-friendly Broadway performance of *The Lion King* in 2011 and has put on 18 autism-friendly Broadway shows as of 2022.

New Zealand is taking part in the inclusive movement of enabling people with diverse needs and their families to enjoy public events and settings. HOYTS and Events cinemas offer sensory friendly film screenings.

Countdown supermarkets offer a low-sensory *Quiet Hour* once a week on Wednesdays. Libraries, trampoline parks, climbing centres, and more are including offering to welcome autistic and neurodivergent people. An increasing number of theatres and festivals across the country are putting on relaxed performances. Galleries and museums, such as the Auckland War Memorial Museum, Wellington Museum and Wellington City Gallery are also offering low-sensory options. Together, these efforts are building a more accessible and inclusive country where no one misses an opportunity because their needs cannot be met.

Who are sensory relaxed performances for?

Sensory relaxed performances are for everyone. They are especially welcomed by those who would benefit from a laid-back, inclusive environment, such as people with movement, sensory, learning, and communication needs, autism, cerebral palsy, dyspraxia, ADHD, Tourette's, dementia, and other neurological conditions.

In New Zealand as of 2023, about 93,000 New Zealanders are autistic. ADHD affects between 2-5% of all children, and half of those children are also diagnosed with a learning disability. The chance of a Kiwi child being diagnosed with Tourette's is one in 1000.

A significant portion of our population, and your potential theatre audiences, is neurodivergent.

Most neurodivergent people want to experience the performance on offer the way it is intended to be presented. This means that we approach sensory accommodations aiming to keep the show as close to the original as possible. Neurodivergent people do not usually want parts of the show to be removed. Rather, they appreciate accommodations made that enable all people to access the show.

A stepping stone

Offering accessible performances increases the number of children who grow up with an interest in theatre. For many neurodivergent children, visiting the theatre may not be something to look forward to. Rather than being a 'fun' event, some children will dread the moment they must enter a dark, fragranced, noisy place where they have no control. A sense of overload may begin in the foyer with noisy people and in the auditorium with people pressed closely together. Ushers may appear to be intimidating and confronting rather than helpful. Loud sounds, bright lights, crowded foyers and new rules may be overwhelming for some children. Rather than being a fun form of entertainment, the outing becomes an anxiety-inducing experience that must be endured.

“For most five-year-old boys, a trip to the cinema is a treat. But for Charlie Webb, who has Asperger’s syndrome, it is a sensory overload – and not in a good way. He has finely tuned hearing and hates sudden loud noises: hand dryers and helicopters upset him, so you can imagine how he feels with Dolby Surround Sound. “I don’t want to go again,” he told his mother, Tracey, after his second and final trip.”*

- The Guardian, 25th May 2013

*Asperger’s syndrome means autism. This term is no longer in common use.

All humans are hard-wired for connection. It is not true that all children with autism prefer to be left alone. Neurodivergent and disabled children generally want to be included and to have the same experiences as everyone else. Simple modifications to a theatre performance can create access to theatre and foster a love of the performing arts.

Chapter 3

The Audience Experience

Create an atmosphere of acceptance

Sensory relaxed performances include everyone by disrupting theatre etiquette. The expectation to sit still and quietly in a dark room for an extended period with no breaks can be a barrier to many people. While theatre should be a welcoming experience, where no one feels the need to hide or deny who they are to attend, more education and understanding are needed across the board to ensure that everyone feels comfortable attending any event they want to attend. Feedback from our audiences has revealed that sometimes their child is able to attend and enjoy a standard theatre performance, but the negative reception from other audience members is too stressful for the parents. Eye rolling, glares and complaints can be directed to these parents when their child stims or rocks or calls out during a show. The barrier here is not the event, and the problem is not the neurodivergent child. It is the perceived theatre etiquette and the audience not understanding that it is not their job to be enforcers of 'standard' behaviour.

Often, if someone knows a behaviour is acceptable, even if it strikes them as unusual, they are not bothered by it. It is only when someone thinks a behaviour is 'not allowed' that it becomes so disruptive to them.

A sensory relaxed performance turns theatre etiquette on its head by making it acceptable to relax, be noisy, and move around during a show. At Tim Bray Theatre Company, we create this expectation of a relaxed atmosphere from the beginning, by tagging our shows "Sensory Relaxed" on our ticket booking website and creating a webpage with information about our accessible offering on our website. We also email each patron who buys tickets for the sensory relaxed performance to ensure that all patrons know that the usual theatre conventions are more relaxed for this show.

We see sensory relaxed performances as an intermediary toward more acceptance and understanding between neurotypical and neurodiverse audiences. The welcoming and accepting atmosphere allows everyone to practise expressing themselves, and it allows them to practise being accepting of others for doing the same. It is a safe space for people to be different together. Ideally, this will lead to more people feeling comfortable attending any performance, relaxed or not, and being able to expect positive regard and acceptance from their fellow theatregoers. Until we reach this goal, it is important to provide sensory relaxed events and other spaces that focus on acceptance and inclusion.

Online resources

Our website hosts resources to help patrons determine if a sensory relaxed performance is right for them. Here is the complete list of our online resources, which can be found in the [Sensory Relaxed tab](#) on our website.

Welcome Video

The welcome video is a short film describing what attending the sensory relaxed performance will be like. Filmed at The PumpHouse Theatre, it follows the journey of arriving at the theatre, picking up tickets, waiting in the foyer, and taking seats in the theatre. Including actual footage from a sensory relaxed show, the video lets patrons know what the theatre will look like and what their experience may include. It shows examples of the stage with different sets, and lets patrons see the chill zone, toilets and public areas around the theatre. The video also includes examples of what the theatre may sound like when it is full of other audience members and gives details about the pre-show introduction.



Frequently Asked Questions

Our FAQs explain what a sensory relaxed performance is and how it differs from our standard performance. They tell patrons what they might expect from the experience, and address concerns such as, “Will I be distracted by other audience members?” or “Who is a sensory relaxed performance for?”

Seating Chart

A colour-coded seating chart helps patrons choose the right theatre seats. It includes details such as proximity to exits, speakers, and performers.

Theatre Rules

These give details about what patrons can and cannot do during the performance. They detail which areas are for the audience, and which are for the performers only. They describe theatre etiquette for a sensory relaxed performance, such as being non-judgmental of other audience members who may be expressing themselves through movement and vocalisation and staying off the stage during the performance. It is important to have clear rules for the audience to follow to keep the audience, performers, and venue staff safe and to have a baseline to reference if there is any confusion or conflict.

Travelling to the Theatre

This includes information about car parking, routes by public transportation, amenities and businesses in the area, and disabled access information. It includes helpful details, such as a photo of the theatre and handy landmarks nearby to provide additional assistance in arriving at the show venue.

Familiarisation Tour Information Page

This is information about booking a free familiarisation visit to the theatre prior to the show. More details about our familiarisation tours are available in the next section.

Preshow Introduction Information Page

This details the pre-show introduction which takes place before the show. The introduction is described in chapter five, *The Show*.

Show Specific Resources

Also included on our website are two resources that are show-specific: the **Story Summary** and the **Meet the Team** documents.

The Story Summary gives complete details of the show.

Descriptions of each scene accompany photos from our dress rehearsal, so the audience can prepare for the plot, characters, and surprises in the show. For some neurodivergent children, surprises are stressful. Being able to know what is going to happen and what the action on the stage will look like can make the show a more relaxing and enjoyable experience for these children.

The Story Summary is broken down scene by scene to match the onstage **Scene List**. The Scene List will be described in chapter five. High-sensory moments in the show, such as lighting blackouts, loud shouting, fights or falls, and startling effects are flagged in bold in the scene breakdown. This lets patrons tailor their show experience to suit themselves by choosing when to take a break from the show.

The Meet the Team document introduces the actors and their characters, the backstage crew, and the front-of-house team. A photo of the actor is accompanied by a photo of their character or characters, showing the audience how the actors will be dressed up and putting a face to a name.

This also can help children understand that actors may be playing multiple different characters as some children are not used to seeing costume changes or acting methods, like changes of physicality and voice, being used to represent different people.

For our Story Summary and Meet the Team documents, we use photos from the dress rehearsal, so these resources are not available until the show season begins. The documents are posted two weeks before the sensory relaxed performance. We put placeholders on our website letting the audience know when these two resources will be available, and we email the audience with a notification once these resources are live. For these reasons we have learned to programme our sensory relaxed performances later in the show season, when possible, to allow time to create these resources.

On our website, we also include an email and phone number for prospective patrons to contact us if they have additional questions or need more information.

Chapter 4

The Venue

Preparing the audience for the show

We offer free familiarisation visits to the theatre before the sensory relaxed performance. Patrons can book a fifteen-minute guided tour of the theatre with the stage manager, giving their child a chance to see the foyer, box office, and toilets, sit in the seat they will have for the show, see the set and the stage, and ask questions. The visit also allows patrons to check out the venue's sensory components (more information on this topic is at the end of the chapter). This provides a gentle introduction to the theatre experience, letting the child experience the new space before adding the bustle of an audience and other elements of the live performance.

Because our show seasons are three weeks long (or longer), we offer these familiarisation visits for the first two weeks that the show is open, so the set on stage is the same as for the sensory relaxed show. This may not be possible for all theatres, and that is okay. Sometimes, even being able to take the drive to the theatre and practise picking up tickets and taking a break during the show is very helpful for the children.

Just let the patrons know what they can expect from the familiarisation visit, and how the theatre will differ from the sensory relaxed show.

Modifying the audience space

In our main theatre, there is a mix of tiered, fixed seats and a flat floor space with removable seats. For our sensory relaxed shows, we remove the floor seats and replace them with beanbags, Rock-It boards, and flat floor space. Audience members all book a ticket for a fixed seat and have the option to sit in their allocated fixed seat or to sit in a beanbag, play on a Rock-It board, or walk around on the floor. We have the space to provide ten beanbags and two Rock-It boards, and they are used on a first-come, first-served basis.

We keep the audience doors open during the entire performance, to ensure the audience feels free to come and go as much as they would like during the show. The audience lights are left on low throughout the entire show to ensure that patrons can move around safely. This also prevents the disorientation some neurodivergent children feel when the lights go out. Ushers are on hand to assist audience members moving around during the show.

To keep the audience lights from washing out the stage lights, we have found success in lighting from the back of the audience block, with the light gradually dimming as it gets closer to the stage. Because our shows are brightly lit, this still leaves plenty of light in the front of the audience for the patrons to see. Lighting from the back of the theatre toward the stage creates a small zone of twilight for about a metre in front of the stage. This gives the audience the full experience of the lighting design on stage without the lighting design being washed out. Because of the steep, pointed roof in the theatre, we choose to hang a couple of lighting instruments pointing up into the roofline to create diffuse, pleasant lighting, which we can control from the lighting desk.

One side of the foyer is designated as a breakout space, which we call 'the chill zone'. The chill zone includes beanbags, benches, and open space, and has a TV with a silent live stream of the performance. Children and families can take a break in the chill zone while staying connected with the performance on the TV. This helps children avoid any parts they may not be keen on or simply have a rest away from the other audience members.

The audience is encouraged to bring fidget toys, weighted blankets, stuffed animals, pillows or cushions, sunglasses, headphones, or other comfort items they require to enjoy the performance.

We allow snacks and drinks inside the theatre during all our shows, which may be especially important for some children attending the sensory relaxed show. We also provide earplugs in case the volume of the show is still too loud for some children.

The house opens early for the sensory relaxed performance to give audience members plenty of time to take their seats. For this show, we do not play any pre-show music, which provides a gentler introduction to the theatre space. One member of the team is seated on the stage to welcome the audience as they enter the theatre. Having someone to focus on helps orient the children and gives them a familiar face, as the team member will have been included in the Meet the Team document. Some children ask the team member questions about the show or tell them what they are excited or worried about. This team member will be on stage during the performance to act as the **Show Guide**, so introducing them first helps the children get used to referencing them during the show. The role of the Show Guide will be discussed in the next chapter.

Reduce capacity

At the theatre, we remove 50 seats from the theatre's original 200-seat capacity. The reduced capacity and flexible seating create a more relaxed atmosphere in the theatre, although having fewer seats available to be sold does have an economic impact.

Reducing the audience capacity at your show venue allows for more space for the audience to move around or swap seats and will make it easier for patrons to get out of the theatre during the show to take a break. It will also reduce overall volume and crowding and create a more relaxing environment. Theatres and venues can consider whether reducing capacity is viable, or if other ways to create a feeling of openness should be explored instead.

Boundaries within the theatre

In our performances, children are not allowed on the stage unless it is a prescribed part of the show. This is to keep the performers and the children safe, as the shows are not usually set up to include audience members, and we do not want children falling off the stage edge or bumping into the set. This rule is included in the **Theatre Rules** on the website and is also announced before each sensory relaxed performance. Ushers are positioned to help prevent children from climbing onto the stage. In spaces where the stage is at the same level as the floor, taping a white line to separate the audience space from the performance space may be helpful.

Devices such as mobile phones and tablets are not allowed in the theatre during a show, but there is an exception for these performances as some children use them as accessibility devices, or to help cope with the new environment.

We still ask patrons to keep devices on silent to respect the preferences of other audience members.

The seating is allocated during our performances, including the sensory relaxed performances. Audience members are encouraged to feel free to come and go from the theatre, use the beanbags and visit the chill zone, but are asked to return to their own allocated seat rather than choose a new one when they want to return to the audience seating. The reason is to prevent a conflict over one child sitting in another child's seat. We encourage the audience to speak to the ushers at the start of the show if they are not happy with their allocated seats, and we make every effort to reseat them before the show begins. We have received feedback that allocating seats reduces the stress of needing to arrive at the theatre early to choose the right seat, as the right seat can be reserved ahead of time using a colour-coded seating chart.

Sounds and smells

Examine your venue for its sensory components and make your audience aware ahead of time of anything that may be distressing or triggering.

This is best done by using the advice of a neurodivergent person or, if that's not possible, consulting with a neurodiversity organisation, so you are seeing these sensory components through the correct lens. See more details about working with a sensory expert in the next chapter.

Here is a brief list of examples of sensory components that may be overwhelming, and ways to work around them. Your theatre may have more or different sensory components.

Sensory component: Automatic hand dryers, toilets, sinks or water fountains may be noisy or startling.

Solution: Turn off automatic hand dryers and offer paper towels instead. Post a sign above automatic toilets, sinks, or water fountains so the user is prepared for triggering the motion. Point out these automatic features during the familiarisation visit.

Sensory component: Strong chemical smells from cleaning products.

Solution: Consider using unscented cleaning products in the 48 hours leading up to the sensory relaxed performance or ventilate the theatre well before the sensory relaxed performance.

Sensory component: Flickering or buzzing light in the foyer.

Solution: Fix the light or, if this is not possible, let your audience members know about the light before the performance. Point this out during the familiarisation visit.

Chapter 5

The Show

Talk to an expert

To make show modifications at Tim Bray Theatre Company, an autism specialist from an autism organisation attends a standard, unmodified show. Also in attendance with the autism specialist is a child who is autistic, neurodivergent or experiences sensory sensitivities. The child acts as our sensory expert. After the show, the specialist and the sensory expert give us feedback about parts of the show that may be distressing for children with sensory sensitivities and gives suggestions for modifications. They offer advice on what parts of the show should be softened or modified and what parts (for example, any surprises) just need to be explained before the show in the pre-show introduction.

The child sensory expert usually returns to attend the sensory relaxed performance and is often proud to find we have followed their advice and suggestions. The autism specialist tells us that their involvement and important title empowers the sensory expert and they take pride in being a key part of helping other children enjoy the theatre.

Both the specialist and the sensory expert can give us authentic guidance for building the sensory relaxed show and letting us know what will best serve our neurodiverse audiences. Working with members of the neurodiverse community and your local autism groups is key to truly engaging with this audience and building a strong sensory relaxed show.

Jack, age 12, our sensory expert for *Greedy Cat* in 2020, shared his thoughts on his role in the sensory relaxed performance for the creation of this handbook. “The role felt quite cool because I got to try to help people that might be going through what I went through. I felt like [the Tim Bray team] added a lot of the things I recommended into the sensory relaxed show. It felt quite cool seeing my recommendations being implemented into the show. It makes me feel happy that I had this opportunity to help others.”

Everyone is an expert on themselves. People with sensory sensitivities are the best people to ask about sensory overload and potential triggers. Asking a young autistic person to view a show and give feedback is the most effective way to identify those sneaky sensory triggers. We have been very fortunate at TBTC to have worked with such generous young autistic people.

Keep in mind

- Your sensory expert may find attending the 'regular' show to give feedback very anxiety-inducing. Try to accommodate them as much as possible – reserve a seat away from most of the audience or allow them access to the exit. Give your sensory expert and autism specialist space to themselves to allow them to settle in and get comfortable in the venue without being disturbed.
- The after-show feedback section of the process may be very difficult and confronting for the sensory expert. Ensure that your autism specialist remains with your sensory expert to assist with self-regulation. In our feedback session, the sensory expert and autism specialist give their feedback privately to the stage manager before the performers and the crew join the conversation. If your sensory expert is presenting feedback to the whole team, encourage all performers and crew to listen attentively and to speak quietly. Allow your sensory expert time to process questions and formulate answers. Remember that eye contact can be painful for some autistic people.
- Recognise the invaluable assistance of your sensory expert with a token of appreciation.

Pre-show Introduction

Our sensory relaxed performance begins with a pre-show introduction, directly before the performance starts. The pre-show introduction introduces the lighting, sound, set, actors, musicians and 'surprises' in the performance.

Our pre-show introduction begins with the person hosting the pre-show introduction taking the stage to welcome the audience to the space. For TBTC, the current pre-show introduction host is Katie Querin. The host will have been included in the Meet the Team document, so they are familiar to the audience. They tell the audience what the pre-show introduction will include and remind them that anyone who wishes not to have any spoilers revealed should wait outside the theatre during the introduction. To date, all audience members have chosen to stay inside for the pre-show introduction.

During the introduction, we like to scale up the different elements to let the audience slowly adjust to more and more stimuli. First, only the host is on the stage. The host communicates with the lighting operator to demonstrate a lighting change: the lights getting brighter or introducing the moving lights. Then, the actors are called to the stage. In our venue, the actors sit down at the front of the stage to be on the level of the children in the audience.

The actors introduce their names and their character's name(s), and they demonstrate their voices or sounds they make.

Important character aspects to explain include loud sounds (e.g., shouting or crying) and highly emotional exchanges (e.g., two characters having a fight). The actors demonstrate what they sound like during the fight and remind the audience that it is a pretend fight and that they are only playing at being upset. This helps the children in the audience who may feel extreme empathy with the characters, and who may become very distressed if they believe a character is frightened or upset.

If an actor is playing more than one character, they can hold up pieces of their other characters' costumes and demonstrate their different voices or sound effects. All these details will have been explained in the Story Summary and the Meet the Team documents, so the live demonstration is reinforcing information that many of the audience have already accessed. This helps to add one more layer of understanding to what the show will be like.

If advised by the autism organisation specialist and our sensory expert, we may make some small modifications to the actors' performances. For instance, an actor entering through the audience may instead enter on the stage instead.

We have been advised to keep the audience area free of performance elements, if possible, so the children can have a secure place to watch the show, free from worry about what may come into their 'zone'. Here is an example of a show modification we made, and the reasons behind it:

Standard: An actor mimes knocking on a door, and the musician accompanies their mime with loud knocking sounds.

Modified: The actor mimes ringing a doorbell and sings, "Ding dong". The musician does not do the loud knocking.

Our thought process: Our sensory expert advised that they were startled by the loud knocking. Because ringing a doorbell instead still tells the same story and does not take away from the performance, we modified the action.

In general, very few performance modifications are made, and they are only made on the advice of our autism specialist and sensory expert. Performers are asked to maintain the same volume and energy as always, as we have found that asking actors to lower their volume or tone down their actions tends to make the action of the story lag or reduces the show's energy. We believe it is inappropriate to ask the actors and musicians to deliver less than they normally do as that short-changes the audience attending the sensory relaxed show and does not give them the opportunity to enjoy the same calibre performance as other audiences.

Focus on introducing the actions, the volume of dialogue, character conflicts, and sounds prior to the show, rather than changing them. Give the audience the opportunity to self-modify by taking a break in parts they dislike, using headphones, or closing their eyes.

Show Guide

Next in the pre-show introduction, the Show Guide is introduced. On the stage is a board showing a list of the scenes in the show, called the Scene List. This Scene List matches the scene breakdown in the Story Summary. A movable arrow travels down the Scene List as the show progresses, to let the audience know which scene is coming up and how much longer remains in the show. The Show Guide is a person seated next to the Scene List on stage. The Show Guide moves the arrow and will also hold up pictures of oncoming scene changes or warn of bright lights or loud sounds. The children and parents in the audience can keep the Show Guide in their eye line to be aware of what is coming up next in the show.

For our Scene List, we simply use a magnetic whiteboard on an easel with a magnetic arrow and printed cards labelled “Scene 1”, “Scene 2”, etc. We may also write specific notes on the whiteboard such as “Lights out” or “loud sound” that the arrow can be pointed to. Using a magnetic whiteboard means the Scene List is quick to create for each new show, easily portable, customisable, and highly visible.

Musicians

In Tim Bray Theatre Company's performances, we often have one or more live musicians. After the actors introduce themselves, the musician will perform pieces from the show, especially snippets of very loud or potentially distressing sounds. At this point, the audience is reminded that it is okay to cover their ears, wear earmuffs, or ask for earplugs if the music is too loud. If we do not have a live musician, we will play examples of the recorded tracks at the volume they will be played during the show.

Scene Demonstrations

Now that the entire cast has been introduced, it is time to introduce small pieces of scenes that may be especially fast-paced, potentially frightening, stressful, or confusing. We also introduce scenes that contain fight choreography or falls to let the audience be reassured that the fight is well-practised and that no one will get hurt.

Below is a breakdown of how we introduced a scene before a sensory relaxed performance of our 2020 performance of *Greedy Cat*.

The scene: Greedy Cat tries to catch fish in a fishbowl. Tense music slowly increases in pitch and volume as Greedy Cat slowly prowls towards the fish, rises up, and strikes, sticking his paw into the fishbowl. Katie, Greedy Cat's owner, shrieks.

The introduction: Before we show the scene, the stage manager describes what will happen. They explain Greedy Cat's actions, the increasingly tense music, and Katie's reaction. They show the audience that the goldfish are pretend and that they are not being hurt by Greedy Cat. The actors and musician take their positions, and the lighting operator gets into the correct lighting state. The Show Guide covers their ears or holds up a placard to show that something loud (tense music and a scream) is about to happen, to cue the audience to cover their own ears if they would like.

The demo: The performers carry out the scene, exactly as they will perform in the actual show. It is important that the performers do not drop their volume or energy during the demonstration so that the audience can prepare for what the scene will be like. If any children dislike the scene, the introduction gives them the ability to choose to cover their ears or leave the theatre to take a break during that scene in the show.

The wrap-up: After the scene finishes, the stage manager and actors reassure their audience that no fish were harmed and that Katie is not upset about Greedy Cat. She is just pretending.

We introduce small portions of larger scenes, generally no longer than a minute. Next, the audience is reminded that during the sensory relaxed performance, it is okay for the audience to call out, move around, come and go, and express themselves as they would like. It is a no judgement zone where everyone can be themselves. Lastly, the audience is reminded that the stage is only for the actors, not the audience members.

To prepare for the pre-show introduction, the person leading the pre-show introduction creates a run sheet that is shared with the lighting and sound operator, actors, and front-of-house team. What is covered in the pre-show introduction is decided on with the help of the autism specialist and the sensory expert. The run sheet gives the order of the material being introduced and allows the pre-show introduction to run smoothly and efficiently in a short time frame, allowing our entire pre-show introduction to take only 15 minutes.

We have received great feedback from audience members saying it is a fantastic way to gently immerse into the theatre experience. By meeting the actors ahead of time, even 'scary' characters like a witch or a baddie can be enjoyed by our neurodiverse audience (and by neurotypical audience members, too). By demonstrating the music in isolation before rolling it into the show, the children can adjust to the pitch and levels and determine if there are any sounds they dislike.

And by reminding the audience to uphold a relaxed, welcoming environment, the remaining stress about a child's needs or behaviour can hopefully be laid to rest.

Many people enjoy the experience of being surprised, startled, or stunned when watching a theatrical experience. Neurodivergent individuals generally do not like uncertainty. For many neurodivergent people, surprises in a play are unwelcome moments of uncertainty that make them feel out of control and anxious. People with cerebral palsy have a heightened startle reflex, which means jump scares can be distressing and even physically painful. It is generally a good idea to review your standard show and consider if there are any moments of potential anxiety for a neurodivergent audience member. There is no need to be concerned about 'ruining the surprise' for a neurodivergent audience member. Neurodivergent audiences will be better placed to appreciate and enjoy the show when the moments of uncertainty are shared before the show.

Chapter 6

Technical Modifications

A sensory relaxed performance should deliver the same magical theatre experience as any standard show. We will not be reducing or changing the actors' performances, instead, we are relaxing the sensory elements of the show and relaxing the classical theatre etiquette requiring everyone to sit still in a dark auditorium and have only 'socially acceptable' expressions and reactions. It is important to maintain all the important elements of the show. For example, if a confetti cannon blast is essential to the plot, the confetti cannon should not be removed. Instead, focus on preparing your audience for the cannon blast. Demonstrate the cannon before the show and consider even pausing the show to integrate a warning about the sound and sight of the cannon. Sometimes technical elements can be softened or reduced without impacting the show's narrative or delivery, and these modifications can be made when practicable. As before with the performance modifications, technical modifications are guided by the sensory expert and the autism specialist. Over time, changes can also be guided by audience feedback and responses.

Here is a detailed example of a technical modification from our 2021 performance of *A Lion in the Meadow and Other Stories* and our reason behind it:

Standard: Flashing strobe lights create the appearance of lightning on the stage. The lightning is accompanied by long, frantic drumming ‘thunder’ on a metal bucket. This sequence is repeated three times.

Modified: The speed of the lights was slowed down and shortened so it was still flashing but no longer strobing, and the ‘thunder’ was slower, more ponderous, and briefer. The lighting and thunder were demonstrated before the show, and the Show Guide indicated to the audience that they might like to cover their ears and close their eyes during the scene in the show.

Our thought process: Our sensory expert advised us that they were overwhelmed by the three long sequences of lights and sound, and they were anxious because they did not know when the lightning and thunder would stop. Because the lightning and thunder were critical to the plot, we focused on modification and preparation rather than removal. Shortening the three sequences and slowing down the flashing of the lights and the speed of the drumming still conveyed the effect of lighting and thunder, while being brief enough to not heighten anxiety.

Demonstrating the full sequence before the show let the audience have certainty of when the action would end and gave them the opportunity to opt-out by closing their eyes or leaving the theatre during the scene. We also posted signs outside the theatre letting the audience know that flashing lights would be used during the show.

Technical changes can be integrated into your overall show season. Most theatres will not have the time in their production week to programme a separate lighting design, nor will the actors have time to rehearse a heavily modified performance. Striving to keep technical and performance modifications simple and to the minimum will help you produce a sustainable, streamlined accessible programme.

Lighting

Bright stage lighting can be difficult for some autistic people to cope with. For our sensory relaxed performances, we reduce the show lighting by 30%. We dedicate a half hour during our production week to run through each show cue with people on stage to check that the lighting is not too dim in any scene, and we have had consistent success with a 30% reduction across a show. Our reason to reduce all cues by the same level is to keep technical modification simple.

It is much quicker to bring down the master fader to 70% than to edit each cue individually, and we have had good feedback from our sensory relaxed audience that the lighting is bright enough to see all the action on the stage and enjoy the bright colours and the design, but not too bright as to be uncomfortable. This works because our shows are brightly lit. For shadowy or dark scenes, a reduction may not be necessary. Some shows will require more specific finessing.

Sometimes we incorporate spinning or changing patterns in the lighting design. We introduce these moving patterns before the show and let the audience know how long they will last. If it is a lot of chaotic movement, we may slow down or simplify the movement. But we do not want to remove the movement completely, especially if the movement is important to the storytelling, such as when producing the effect of rain or waves.

The only cues we will remove are lighting if it sweeps over or points out into the audience area. This is because we do not want the stage elements to invade the audience's zone. We modify these cues by instead having the lighting sweep the back of the stage or, if the cue is a flourish not important to the storytelling, removing it. However, if a light over the audience is a key element to the story, such as during our performance of *The Lighthouse Keeper's Lunch* where the lighthouse light beams around the theatre, we demonstrate it to the whole audience before the show. This gives them a chance to move seats or prepare to cover their eyes.

Sound

Microphones can be overwhelming to some children with sensory sensitivities. Having a sound surround them in the theatre, or being worried about the possibility of feedback, can be unpleasant and distracting. Tim Bray Theatre Company shows only mic singing and instruments in the show, and dialogue is not miked. We opt to lower the sound levels for music, sound effects, and instruments. We find that removing the mics completely may be too quiet, so we spend half an hour during the production week setting levels for the sensory relaxed performance to reach a happy medium of levels low enough to be accessible but high enough to still be heard well.

Sometimes, sound effects are designed to be loud, such as the sound of a crash or an aeroplane. We will lower these sound effects slightly, but most importantly we will demonstrate the sound effects before the show during the pre-show introduction. The Show Guide will cover their ears or show a placard before the sound effect is played, to warn the audience that they may like to cover their ears, too.

Some performances used recorded tracks instead of a live musician. We lowered the sound levels by five decibels in the audience speakers. This allowed us to quickly set levels for the whole show. Generally, five decibels has worked well for all our shows so far.



Scene changes

Scene changes may be noisy or visually startling for some audience members. It can be disorienting to suddenly see a solid wall move or a door be wheeled off stage. In the pre-show introduction, talk about any scene changes which occur during the show. During our performances, we print out large photos of the different scene changes, which are held up by the Scene Guide shortly before the scene change takes place. This allows the audience to prepare themselves for the upcoming change of scenery.

Chapter 7

Preparations for actors, front-of-house, and crew

Team training

A sensory relaxed training session is provided to the actors, crew, and front-of-house team by the autism specialist. The training session introduces the concept of neurodiversity and teaches the team about what to expect from the sensory relaxed show. They learn why a standard theatre performance may be difficult for a neurodivergent child to cope with, and why putting on sensory relaxed performances are so important.

The actors

The training session is helpful for letting the actors know what to expect from the audience during the sensory relaxed show. They learn that some behaviours which may be displayed during the show are:

- Calling out, shouting, clapping, or making loud noises
- Repetitive rocking, flapping, or other motions
- Entering and exiting the theatre during the show
- Wandering to the front of the stage and around the auditorium
- Children asking the actors questions or talking to actors
- Headphones, sunglasses, fidget toys, weighted blankets, or devices being used

Tim Bray Theatre Company shows are full of children laughing, calling out, and joining in the fun, so our actors are well used to a noisy audience. The training session lets actors know that neurodiverse children in attendance may have other reactions they are not used to and that these reactions are all okay during the show.

Before the show, we let the actors know what guidelines are put in place to keep them and the audience safe during the performance. We discuss what the procedure is if a child gets on to the stage, and how we can stop the show if a child has become very overwhelmed and needs to be taken out of the theatre to have a break. So far in our experience of sensory relaxed shows, we have not had to utilise a show-stop, and any children hoping to join the performers on stage have been quickly retrieved by a nearby parent or usher before they got too far on stage.

The response from our performers to the sensory relaxed shows has been enthusiastically positive. The actors enjoy the pre-show introduction as a chance to have a more direct connection with the audience and love that the sensory relaxed show means the children can enjoy a fun theatre experience. Many performers rate the sensory relaxed show as a highlight of the season and say they too can relax and enjoy the show with the audience in the welcoming and open atmosphere. They also find that learning more about how autistic and neurodivergent people might experience the world is enlightening and beneficial to them overall.

The crew

The lighting and sound operators, backstage crew, and stage management also attend the sensory relaxed training session.

The crew is included in the pre-show introduction, demonstrating lighting, sound, and other technical elements, so it is important that they too understand the goals of the sensory relaxed performance.

It is also key to include the lighting and sound operator in the show-stop procedure and to ensure the crew understand the technical changes that are to be made during the performance.

The Front of House team

The front-of-house team works very directly with the sensory relaxed audience, and in many ways is the key point of contact for the show. They welcome the audience, answer questions, maintain order, and keep the audience safe. The front-of-house manager and ushers attend the sensory relaxed training session to learn how their audience might react or behave during the show.

For a large sensory relaxed audience, we bolster our ranks with volunteers who have experience working with neurodivergent children. Reach out to your local autism and neurodiversity organisations to find volunteers with the experience you need. Some of our volunteers are neurodivergent teenagers or adults who enjoy helping younger children have an inclusive theatre experience. Others are parents or teachers of neurodivergent children.

Chapter 8

Creating your own sensory relaxed show

Focus on core values

Tim Bray Theatre Company created this handbook to assist other theatres and events with offering a sensory relaxed show. We have tried to take some of the stress out of creating a new accessible show by sharing our experiences and offering advice, options, and ideas. But every theatre venue, performance and event is unique, and every sensory relaxed show will contain different elements.

The most important aspects of building and hosting a sensory relaxed performance are community connection, creating a welcoming space, and being honest about what you can provide. This chapter will summarise the core values laid out in this handbook and will frame how every theatre, from a small community production to a national tour, can provide this accessible show.

Connect with your community

The importance of connecting with your local neurodiverse communities cannot be overstated. Learning directly from organisations and neurodiverse adults and children helps you create a strong, collaborative offering that delivers what your community needs. A direct collaboration will grow your audience as you will be guided by your audience base telling you exactly what they would like to see in a show.

To build our sensory relaxed performance, we sent out a survey through many organisations, groups, and schools. Because our shows are for children, we heard from parents, teachers, and carers. It's best to hear directly from the people you are trying to reach; speak with autistic and neurodivergent people, not only with organisations. We got feedback from people on what made a standard show inaccessible to their child or student, and what they would like to see from our sensory relaxed show. After gathering data from a large group across New Zealand, we were ready to build the framework of our show. To maintain that engagement with the community and have constant feedback on what we should improve upon or next include, we now send out an audience survey after every sensory relaxed performance.

To find your local organisations to collaborate with, you can visit the [Autism NZ website](#) for a list of local branches.

Altogether Autism and ADHD New Zealand also have a widespread national network. ACE (Autism Consultancy and Education) is an Auckland-based enterprise that advocates for autistic people. Contact specialist schools in your area, and search for local autism and neurodivergence groups on social media. Work together with your local theatres to develop a knowledge resource for building your accessible theatre programme.

If resources allow, develop an advisory board staffed with neurodivergent individuals and professionals, parents, carers and neurodivergent communities to collaborate with you. Remember, insight and experience from these individuals are a valuable service, and this information should not be expected for free. Arts Access Aotearoa is a great organisation for providing guidance on how to build your advisory committee.

And while rolling up your sleeves and just doing it is great and to be encouraged, the development of your own Accessible Policy is also an important step for an organisation. Arts Access Aotearoa has tools on how to develop your accessibility policy.

Create a welcoming space

Forget strict theatre etiquette and focus on inclusion and accommodation. What is most important about your theatre environment? For Tim Bray Theatre Company, it is important to keep children off the stage during performances and under the supervision of a parent or guardian. It is not important to keep the audience in their seats, to keep the audience quiet, or to keep the audience still. Outline the important rules of your theatre environment which must be maintained, such as rules governing safety. Outline behaviours and activities you can embrace, such as noise and movement, and those you will need help to manage, such as meltdowns. Have a plan for enforcing the important rules and managing enthusiastic outbursts while continuing to maintain a friendly, welcoming space.

Remind the audience throughout the experience, and especially when you are welcoming them to the theatre, that it's okay to be themselves. Our audience feedback has been that the simple reminder to "relax and be yourself" has been the key to enjoying sensory relaxed theatre. It is the responsibility of everyone in the theatre to create a welcoming atmosphere, from the actors to the front-of-house team to the other audience members in the space. Remind the audience that sensory relaxed theatre should be a supportive, judgement-free experience and that noises, movement, comfort items, and coping strategies are all welcome.

Be honest

Let your audience know that you are putting on your first sensory relaxed performance and that you welcome their input and feedback to help you learn. Be clear about the onsite facilities, such as break-out spaces, chill zones, and wheelchair-accessible areas. Put up notices about intense sensory elements, such as bright lights, loud sounds, or sudden movement, that occur during the show or in public spaces.

Tell your audience if you are providing comfort items, such as beanbags, fidget toys or headphones. If you can't or don't wish to provide these items, that's okay - just let the audience know, so they can bring their own. If resources allow, create a frequently asked questions section on your website, to address potential audience questions and give as many details as possible.

Avoid exaggeration or making promises you can't keep. Rather than saying, "You'll laugh and enjoy the show!", remind the audience that it's okay to like the show, or to not like it. For example, the person who is introducing the show may say: "I'm very excited about sharing this show with you all. I really like it. I'm hoping you will like it, too." Do all you can to provide a supportive, comfortable experience, and then let the audience have their own experience. Above all, relax. If you and your team are relaxed, the audience is more likely to be relaxed.

You can accomplish this by starting off small and steadily growing your offering. Set achievable, realistic goals, and give yourself plenty of time to build the performances.

It takes time for accessible offerings to develop a following. Allow time for the community to build trust in your sensory relaxed show, and for the word to spread. Over time, you will refine your marketing and messaging to reach more people. You can market directly to your audience by putting up ads and posts in spaces visited by neurodivergent people.

Arts Access Aotearoa has an event calendar for accessible events, where you can post about your sensory relaxed event. Autism and neurodiversity community groups exist on Facebook and other social media platforms. And you can make sure to tag your events as accessible and sensory relaxed on your ticketing platform or other places where you advertise, so an Internet search for sensory relaxed events directs the audience to find you. It is natural for new offerings to be attended by a small audience that grows over time, so do not be put off if your audience numbers start out small.

Access tickets

In 2022, we introduced a discount price access ticket for autistic and neurodivergent audience members attending our sensory relaxed shows. A companion ticket is available at the same discounted price. We created this access ticket based on feedback from our audiences, who cited the high cost of events as a reason they might choose not to go to the theatre. Accessing events can be expensive if they come with the additional cost of a companion or accessible transport. Additionally, some parents were hesitant to pay full price for a show they were not sure their child would tolerate. A discounted ticket makes our shows more widely accessible to more people. Consider making a discount available for disabled, Deaf, or neurodivergent audience members, or finding ways to assist with transport or companion costs.

Have a go!

Sensory relaxed performances are needed up and down the country to allow all people to experience the joys of live theatre. The team at Tim Bray Theatre Company hope that this handbook can be a useful tool for creating your own sensory relaxed performance. The more these performances are made available, the more they will begin to be anticipated and sought after for all shows.



We hope that we have taken some of the guesswork out of the process and encourage you to get started building your own accessible offering. This handbook is a starting point, and you will learn throughout your own process of creating and putting on these shows. You may find that adding sensory relaxed offerings widens your audience, expands your community, and deepens the meaning of your performances and events.

Now it's your turn. Have a go!

Resources

[Tim Bray Theatre Company Sensory Relaxed resources](#)

[Autism NZ](#)

[ADHD New Zealand](#)

[Altogether Autism](#)

[Arts Access Aotearoa](#)

[ACE \(Autism Consultancy and Education\)](#)

The list of resources available for relaxed events is small. Tim Bray Theatre Company hopes to grow this list by offering this handbook as a resource and by inviting other theatre to share their own resources. The more we connect and share what has worked, and what has not, the stronger we can build a diverse, robust selection of relaxed events. To share, ask for advice, or to connect with us, please email info@timbray.org.nz.



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