

All in a Row – Post-show discussion

This open forum event was chaired by Terri Paddock at Southwark Playhouse following the performance of All in a Row on Thursday 21 February 2019. Terri was joined onstage by writer Alex Oates (AO), director Dominic Shaw (DS) and cast members Simon Lipkin (SL), Michael Fox (MF), Hugh Purves (HP) and Charlie Brooks (CB).

This has been transcribed from an event video. Any instances where noise has obscured the speech have been indicated with ...

Terri Paddock: First of all, thank you all very much for coming tonight and staying for this post-show discussion. My name is Terri Paddock. I am not connected with the production or Southwark Playhouse. I do post-show talkbacks at plays and musicals all over the place all the time. It's something I really enjoy doing, and I'm really privileged to be here to do this tonight with this team.

(Laughter as Simon Lipkin enters.)

Simon Lipkin: Sorry!

(Laughter.)

TP: I will also introduce you to everyone here but it's really, I think, for this show in particular I don't really want to think of it as this is the panel onstage, and this [seating arrangement is kind of us and them. I view this really as an open forum, a conversation, and I]hope that you feel that as well and want to contribute.

Before I introduce you to these guys, it would be really helpful if I could know a little bit more about all of you. Again so, as I said, I do post-show Q&As all the time, I'm not an expert on autism, I'm not autistic, I do not have anyone in my family who is autistic, I have not been a carer, so I say that and admit straight up my ignorance and apologise if I say anything, that I'm using language incorrectly or anything of that sort. And If I do, please call me out on it because I want to know that and I want to learn.

But I do know about theatre. I see a lot and I've been writing about and championing theatre for over twenty years and running events like this for a similar amount of time.

So if I could know a little bit more about you. The first thing to say is, if you prefer not to answer any questions, then don't, but the first thing is I would like to know if we have any people who are autistic. The first question is: anyone who prefers not to answer whether or not they're autistic, and I'm including all of you here on the stage? Anyone who is autistic? Yes, thank you, okay. Anyone who is family of someone who's autistic? Anyone who's been a carer? Okay, thank you.

Alright, so I think I should start by acknowledging that this production of this play has been quite controversial, and we want to deal with that tonight, but we don't need to just deal with that, because we've also seen a piece of work that merits discussion for all sorts of other reasons. But again, it's really helpful to be able to gauge how many people here tonight are aware that there's a lot of controversy around it?

(Laughter as lots of hands go up.)

Right, okay, so I don't need to give an overview of the controversy, that's great, so we don't need to spend any time on that.

Audience Member 1: Can I just say, we don't know, so we'd quite like to know what the controversy is.

SL: How long have you got?

Audience Member 1: The short version!

TP: Okay, I will give a bit of an overview, but thank you for letting me know that. So, well, in brief, the controversy, a lot of the controversy we'll go into more detail because we've got a lot of questions, is around the treatment of autism in the play and, in particular, controversy around how the character of Laurence is depicted in the use of puppetry. That's the very short version. It has caused a lot of upset from people in the autistic community, lots of different views on this, lots of things fueled on social media. There has also been a petition that's been signed by a lot of people to try to get the show cancelled. Is there anything else I needed to add?

So that's in brief.

So, I'm really glad that you guys are here tonight because I've mentioned that a lot of this controversy has been fueled by social media. I actually work in social media, it's what I do for a living, so I hate it when bad things happen on social media but they do, don't they? Things get out of hand. And for things that are nuanced and controversial sometimes social media is not the best way to have that conversation so I'm really happy that we're all here tonight in person having that conversation. Having said that, I also recognise a lot of people who want to be part of this conversation are not able to be here tonight for whatever reason, because it might be difficult for them to watch this play, they can't physically get here but they want to be here, so also online there have been submissions and people sending questions in advance, we have a lot of questions that have been sent in online.

Also I want to know, do any of you already know that you've got something you would like to say or ask tonight? You've got - okay great. And for the rest of you I will be looking for hands in the

audience, and you can put your hand up and ask questions at any time and I will again, with respect to people who have taken the time to send questions in, deal with those.

On the subject of social media, again, because good things happen on social media as well, you are very welcome to turn your phones on, to take photos, to tweet, facebook, whatever you'd like, just keep them on silent. If you do want to mention the play this is their Twitter handle @allinarowplay, and the Twitter handle for the theatre (@swkplay.) You are very welcome to tag me as well, and if you think I'm doing something bad go ahead and tell me, that's fine. That's me, on Twitter as well (@TerriPaddock) I also run a theatre website called @MyTheatreMates, and that's the details of my website if you want to look up any of that information.

Also on the subject of social media, we are recording this, for the benefit of people who want to see what we're discussing here tonight but aren't here. It's not being live streamed, but we will be sharing the video afterwards. Okay, that's important.

Shall I introduce you to some people?

I have here on stage with me Dominic Shaw, who directed the play, Alex Oates who wrote the play, the cast you will recognise: Simon Lipkin, Michael Fox, Hugh Purves, and Charlie Brooks. The cast, I think that we only have them for about thirty minutes, they've got to shoot off and rest, but if you want to carry on the discussion beyond that, Alex and Dominic are very happy to stay on beyond that.

Finally, something I'll say at the beginning that I'll ask people here on stage to think about for the end - I think everything in life is a learning opportunity and I think that there's a lot of positives that we can take out of what happened and what we discuss tonight so I'm going to say at the end, you know, if you want to share if you think there's anything you've learned from this experience. You can think about that now rather than me springing it on you at the very end.

Okay, so, with all of that in mind, and by the way you guys can share that too.

So to start, a little bit of context. This is not specific to the play, but I think it's helpful to understand what has been brought to the play before it was even produced. So let me start with you, Alex, you have worked for a long time as a carer. How long did you work as a carer and how did you become a carer?

Alex Oates: I've worked for over ten years as a carer, for people with all sorts of disabilities including autism, I became a carer after I graduated. I studied theatre. I'm from Newcastle and decided I wanted to stay in London, and my mum said "Well you're going to have to get a proper job." I'd always loved and really been passionate about disability because my grandmother in the 70s was a deputy headmistress of a special school in Newcastle, and she always used to tell me about the stories so I've always been interested. So I applied for a job and became a carer, one to one, with all sorts of amazing people, with a range of disabilities. And then I became involved with one particular autistic boy, who I worked with for seven years, who is

probably the main inspiration for this play. His dad's here tonight. He [the father] spotted me when I was out working with another guy and said "Will you come work for my son?"

I recently decided to move back to Newcastle, because I couldn't... I got a bit sick of the pollution in London, and I still keep in touch with the people. A difficult thing that I've found with people who have learning disabilities is, a lot of time with support workers there's a high turnover, and it's quite difficult for people to understand the support that's needed. So I come back once a month and I see people who I used to work with.

TP: So you're not currently working as a carer, but you still have relationships with the people that you worked with? And you already mentioned that this family in this play are inspired by a real family and clearly those people know about the play and have been involved.

Okay, so not specifically the decisions made for this production, but let's talk for a moment about puppetry, because before this production I think we've got quite a lot of puppetry experience up here. Simon I'm gonna pick on you first if you don't mind.

Simon, I first saw on stage in the original cast of Avenue Q. Any other experience with puppetry?

Simon Lipkin: Fair bit, yeah.

TP: So, a quick snapshot of your experience with puppetry.

SL: I love puppets, they're amazing. Yeah, Avenue Q, and I did The Lorax at the Old Vic which was a puppet, and I did some Jim Henson stuff with the Muppets, and other stuff. And I think they are amazing, and it's an incredible art form. I think it's a strong statement given the current climate that we're sitting in, but I think you can portray way more visceral emotion than you can with any actor. Put a puppet on stage next to an actor, they win. Hands down, whether that be comedy, whether that be tragedy, whether that be anything, because they are, it's just a beautiful medium and art form.

Yeah they are, when you just stick them on a rod or a sofa or whatever, it is just lifeless thing, but the minute you put one in the hands of a good puppeteer, they're the most alive beautiful things. It's the reason why the art form has been the prominent art form for hundreds and thousands of years. I think they're amazing.

TP: Thank you. Hugh, obviously you are an actor but you trained as a puppeteer.

Hugh Purves: I've never acted professionally, I've done youth theatre before, but all my jobs have been puppetry, so I call myself a puppeteer before I call myself an actor because it's sort of what I aim towards. If someone asked me to do an acting job, I could probably give it a good go.

SL: He's a great actor.

Michael Fox: We're all giving it a go.

(Laughter)

HP: I only look for puppetry jobs because it's what I prefer to focus on.

TP: We'll come back to the use of puppetry in this, but I want to talk about your performance as well. Dominic, you obviously have - because I've done Q&As to shows you've done with puppets in them before - so tell us about your puppetry experience.

Dominic Shaw: I did a production of Avenue Q at GSA, then last year I did a show called The Secret Garden, where we used puppets to represent the dead, and spirits, and also we used a puppet to represent Colin, who was a sick boy who was sort of on the brink of death, in the context of that story, and then actually became a real person, so we used that device. Yeah, a fair bit of experience, but I think with actor vs puppeteer, what we're actually talking about is storytelling and storytellers. Puppetry is an amazing way of telling stories in a way that you can't do with humans in certain contexts, and that's the thing to remember, it's all about context and how we use it in the right context.

TP: Alex, what about you?

AO: This is the first thing I've put a puppet in. I love puppets, and I love theatre. I'm a theatre obsessive, and I've always just loved it. I've seen, you know, puppets portray children, in things, countless times.

TP: Any other, I'm not sure about Michael and Charlie -

MF: No, I don't have any experience.

TP: So for the cast, what was it that attracted you to this play?

SL: The story. I have two non-verbal autistic cousins who are no longer in this country, because the support wasn't there for them. Their mum and dad, my uncle and his wife, were not coping well, and watching that was super tough for everybody. Every aspect. So when I read this play, I kind of saw a family that I'd seen, and it was heartbreaking and cool, because I know that they felt a lot of guilt, because they thought *we're not looking after our children properly*, and I saw that in this play and so it spoke to me, and I thought it was a good script.

MF: There's an honesty in the language which I think is really interesting, I was really intrigued by the thoughts that were allowed to be put out into the space, and they're not always right but then moments of real darkness can be followed by humour, sort of gallows humour. I found that really intriguing, I thought it was really honest and human. For me, it wasn't to do with my part, I

was just intrigued by these two characters on stage, really just allowing themselves to say every aspect of the thoughts that we don't think we're really allowed to say.

HP: I only encountered the play when I auditioned for it. I sort of rocked up not knowing what the show really was and then I - the audition was nothing really to do with... We did a bit with Laurence, but it was mostly Sian doing general puppet stuff.

TP: And Sian Kidd is the puppeteer director.

DS: Puppet designer and director.

TP: Puppet designer and director.

HP: And then it was when I read the script after they offered me, but I hadn't said yes yet, I thought *oh I'll read it then*, it was just like a really smart thing, just a script between these three people who care a lot about somebody, but our characters don't know how to deal with it. And it was just like, I thought *wow this is really interesting*. This was the first time I'd seen a show like this, or a play like this, so I said yes.

TP: And Charlie.

Charlie Brooks: You know, much the same. I think it's a really challenging, brave piece of writing that found the fine line between humour and heartbreak brilliantly and I think the challenge of it and the voice that it gives to these parents to, so that they feel less alone, I suppose. It's important, it's really wonderful to be part of something that is so important, and to tell their story because it's not told.

TP: Alex, why did you want to write this particular play? What did you hope to achieve?

AO: So I mentioned I worked with this specific lad in a situation similar to the play where he ended up going to residential school, and I witnessed firsthand the anguish that his parents went through and the anguish that he went through as a result of the situation. And I've also worked with many people where the parents are often in a similar position and then following in regard to residential school, I noticed so many things within the residential school system: the way social services treat severely autistic people, Level 3 autistic people - I'm learning, as well, all the time, using Twitter, about the right language to use - and so I feel if I can tell this story then parents and people going through it, but specifically the parents. Because I never actually expected someone with Level 3 autism to be able to come see this play and so I knew that I was sort of writing it for the parents. I thought, if they could come see it then they would feel less alone, and it might empower them to help each other and create a system where these people with Level 3 autism are more fulfilled and have happier lives.

TP: And before I get to some of the questions that have been sent in, and audience questions - Dominic, did you expect, when you took on the production, the controversy, did you anticipate it?

DS: Not to the level that we've experienced at all, no. I mean, I certainly knew that the decision to use the puppet would be contentious to an extent and would be a bold decision some would like or not like, maybe have some opposition to. But I didn't anticipate it to be misunderstood as I think it's been, which has been the hurtful thing about this process, the misunderstanding. And I think part of that is, as you mentioned it before, about social media, Twitter in particular, can be I think a toxic environment for a conversation, and you can't convey nuance in that rapid environment, sometimes, you can't convey what you want to convey. And I know that we've had a lot of criticism about that.

One of the things people are saying is come and see the play, and let's have the discussion, with context, let's have people view it live so they can have the discussion then critique it, that's great. But it's been pre-judged, we've had that criticism. And it was just really difficult. We put out a promotional video because you have to promote these things if you want anyone to, come, at this level of fringe or Off-West End theatre, you have to put it out there somehow. But, in hindsight, I don't think the puppet photographs very well, so that was a learning curve we had to go through, and then we were very much kind of on the back foot of trying to then convey the meaning and all that kind of stuff so, yeah, it wasn't a perfect process. But did I think it was going to be as much as it was? Absolutely not, no.

TP: We have questions that get into some of those points so I'm going to catch up on this. This question is submitted by John McCready, who is not autistic but has autistic family members. He is asking how many severely autistic people you met in writing the play or in the production process and how engaged were they. Alex?

AO: So, as I said earlier, I spent seven years working very closely with a severely autistic boy, through him I would say I've known about five or six. I didn't engage them specifically in the process because they don't have the level of communication that would be able to give their own answers in the process.

TP: And this is probably for Dominic. Did you audition any young adults or teen actors for the role of Laurence, whether they be autistic or not? No. That was from Louise Poole, who is the parent of an autistic child.

There is a famous play, theatregoers in the audience will know, A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, there's a disabled child but in that case the child is not shown, if you ever considered that that was an option?

AO: In A Day in the Death of Joe Egg the child is on stage, isn't she? And she's in a wheelchair and there's one scene where she comes out of the wheelchair...

TP: Oh, I've seen productions where she isn't.

AO: I mean yeah, the one I saw, it's in the script. For me, I've said before that I'm passionate about inclusion and representation, and what I mean by that is I like to see disability represented on stage so the idea of just writing out Laurence in this play was something I didn't consider.

TP: Tell us a bit more why did you decide to use the puppet, and how was this developed?

AO: I knew I wanted to have Laurence on stage, and because of the situation that Laurence is in, because he has no control over his life, he's going to residential school, I thought it would be a good metaphor to use a puppet, that's one reason. I thought it wasn't properly realistic to do a fringe play with a child actor, like just because of the budget. A lot of people have been tweeting, saying that we're only doing this for money, and -

(Laughter.)

AO: It's fringe theatre, like, we're all losing money doing this, so we couldn't afford to have a child actor if we wanted to, but also I don't think the play is appropriate to have a child in because there's language and stuff, so I thought puppetry, for all the reasons that these guys have mentioned. And I also thought, because with puppetry we can take a team of people, and we can all work together, and create as realistic a representation of a severely autistic person that we could do, and two of the people on that team who have created Laurence are autistic, so it's not that we've excluded autistic people from the process, and yeah. That's what we did.

TP: And there have been criticisms of the way this puppet looks, particularly the puppet's skin colour. What would you say to those critics?

DS: Well, we did a sort of R&D workshop week where we wanted to figure out first of all what kind of puppetry we wanted to use because, obviously - Hugh can speak to this - there's lots of different types, and we sort of landed on this solo movement idea, where it's the torso of the puppet, and the puppeteer's legs, we decided that was the best way to do that. Then we were thinking about materials and the scale of it, the R&D puppet was nothing about the material, just the shape and scale of it. We wanted to have the size be the same as an eleven-year-old boy at that stage, pre-pubescent, and we knew after the R&D that we'd have to get a material that would look good under lights, that was tactile, soft. We didn't want to have a skin colour, because that would be that sort of uncanny thing that Sian was particularly keen to avoid, so we wanted something neutral that could be projected onto, in a way, so bright colours wouldn't have worked. And we landed on - material, not the colour - the material of felt, wool and felt, so it's an organic, tactile, non-synthetic material, that's what we landed on. In hindsight, this grey is maybe something we would have changed had we known, but I still think it was the best decision for Laurence in that context.

AO: It's worth pointing out, when we did the R&D with that puppet, not sure if anyone's seen the pictures of the first puppet that we used, which is on the petition, we all instantly said we can't use this puppet because it's ghoulish and we don't want to represent the child like this.

TP: One of the other things that came up in a lot of comments is that simply by using the puppet you are dehumanising autistic people. I think you all have already touched on that, I wondered if you want to address it directly?

HP: I've been in lots of different shows with lots of different human characters, animal characters... The reason we use puppetry is because it gives something more life than you would imagine. It's, in a way, more magical than an actor, because an actor you'd expect to see walking and talking, whereas a puppet is kind of *oh my god it's moving, it's amazing!* So saying it dehumanises it, I don't think it's quite appreciating what puppetry, at least, what it is to me, which is making something way more human, than it used to be. Or way more living, and characterful and have a personality, than it used to have.

TP: And I think I would add to that to anyone who hasn't been watching the videos or hasn't seen the performance, Hugh does perform. You all in the room appreciate this, [to Hugh]: you are acting, as almost the puppet of Laurence, is really an extension of you and you are expressing yourself with your body and face so you are Laurence as well. And you are a great actor. So there we go.

We're going to take some audience questions now.

Audience Member 2: I would be interested to know how each of you sees the decision of the mother [in the play] to call social services?

TP: So this is about the plot of the play - spoiler alert - the mother is the one who calls social services. Do people on the panel - and I'm going to direct this more at the cast and Charlie, to start with, do you think that was the right thing to do?

CB: I think the thing about this play is there is no right answer. That's the question and that's the very powerful message that the play has: there's no right answer. They're at a point where they - she specifically, the way she feels that somebody else, I mean, it makes me cry saying those words, that somebody else can look after your child and give them a better life than you feel capable of. It's horrendous and heartbreaking, as a mother myself. How would I ever begin to process that decision-making, and where she must have been emotionally to come to that decision.

So do I think it's right or wrong? I don't know. I'm not there, I've never been there. I think this is one story about one person who responded, who made a decision and still at the end doesn't know. But she's just trying to do what's best for her child.

TP: Simon?

SL: I very much agree with that. I think it would be impossible to say that there's a right or wrong answer to that. Martin [the father, who he plays] understands. He says, "I know why you did it," you know, because in that specific story that we're telling, you know, maybe it could be super helpful, maybe it could be terrible. I mean, we spoke to a few mothers of children similar to Laurence, and one mother said that her son went to a residential school and it was like looking at a different kid, that he was happier. So that's great but what might work for that person might not for another and that is - we are telling... I'm gonna backtrack a little bit, just. We're telling one story. We're not telling the story of an entire subject matter, and that's really hard, it's really hard to do that, to cover every base, to please everybody - you have to make a choice and tell a story a certain way. And we're telling this specific child and family dynamic, and I think to pick up on what you said earlier, the metaphor of using that puppet and doing that in this situation, not with all autistic people, but this specific boy - he is desperate to communicate.

He is desperate to be understood, he is desperate to connect with his family and his family are desperate to connect with him. And they can, in certain ways, using sign language, learning and knowing their child, being intuitive, but there is something between them, and that I think is so beautiful, right or wrong. I don't think, however compelling this argument of using a puppet may be, if you don't like it, and it upsets you, then we are so sorry. You should never be upset and it breaks our hearts that that's happened because that's never the intention, that's never the thought behind it. But there is a Laurence, right there [pointing at Hugh], who is desperately trying to get his emotion through, who we are trying to connect with but can't. And that's just this situation and this story. That's what I think.

TP: I'm going to go back to submitted questions. Simon Allen, who prefers not to answer whether or not he's autistic, but does say he's the parent of an autistic child, has a few questions. I'm gonna jump to one that kind of relates to something you've just touched on, Simon. He says "while some autistic people have clearly engaged positively with the play, do you acknowledge that extreme distress has been caused to many others, not least to children and adults in my family who have endured lifetimes of being labelled as less because of societal prejudice towards autism? They find this representational approach reductive, oppressive, and dehumanising." We've touched on many of these, but I wonder if Alex could address that. Do you acknowledge that?

AO: I acknowledge, yeah. I've seen the videos, I've read the blogs. You know, somebody sent me a video of them saying to their autistic child, "Oh look, there's a play going on in London with a puppet," and the kid was like "Oh, that's terrible," and obviously that's really upsetting, so yeah absolutely I acknowledge it.

I would also say that there's been a lot of exaggeration, and a lot of stoking of the fire, for example this petition that you mentioned with 15,000 signatures, has a picture of our R&D puppet which does look ghoulish. And it also mentions in the description that severely autistic people are often subjected to bleach enemas, torture, and are often killed. Now, if I was sent

that, I would be upset, and I would sign that petition, but I'm not sure those people signing it have actually looked into this play and understand the full world of it.

TP: A follow up, related question from Simon Allen is that some of the response online is that "you should see the play before you judge" and I think in most circumstances we would say that to everyone to do before you judge anything, but that for many people affected that's too difficult to do.

SL: That's understandable. And representation is key and you should stand up for what you believe in. No one - I can only speak for myself but I don't think a single person here would argue otherwise.

TP: So you understand why people are upset and you appreciate that?

SL: Of course.

DS: I think it's about the conflation of it via Twitter and going back to - it's so easy to sort of jump on a bandwagon and the argument against us. The arguments against us, are hugely compelling conversations to be having, that we should all be having. I think the problem that we've faced is that some of those arguments in context of this story, what Simon is referring to, get a bit misplaced. Arguments that are happening within the community, within these hashtag groups, get projected onto certain pieces of theatre. We happen to be one of them, and I'm not saying that I'm not... we have to have these discussions as a society, but this play isn't necessarily trying to have all of those discussions and sort of meet all of those criticisms. We can't do that. It really is about a specific story, and it is from the viewpoint of the parents, and that is Alex's choice.

AO: I wouldn't say that these guys are a bandwagon or anything like that. I would say that they're a marginalised community who are angry and they have every right to be angry because of years of being misrepresented, and resources, funding is at its lowest. They have every right to be angry and fighting for themselves and I totally understand why...

SL: Some people are just nasty. I got called a Nazi the other day, as a Jew, that was fun!

TP: You did also seek advice from the National Autistic Society. What happened there?

DS: Paul, our lovely producer who's up there, had many conversations with them. The thing that I've learned about the NAS is that they're sort of quite a big corporation. They've got a team of script readers, who sort of read things that are going to be put on in TV and film, and theatre, and advise. So Paul had many conversations back and forth, they read the play, they made a statement where they recognised the play's strengths, but they gave us a couple of notes about the script and we actually took those notes on, which was great advice from them, but they did... I think what happened, again I can't say, but they took that to their superiors within this big

corporation, and they obviously said they weren't comfortable supporting us because of the representation of autism by a puppet so, that's how that all happened.

TP: Okay, any other audience questions?

Audience Member 3: Did it occur to you at any point prior to any of the outcry that maybe you could play the whole play with puppets, to equalise the situation?

TP: I'm going to let Alex answer first because Alex did actually specify in the script, how he wanted a puppet, so Alex.

AO: No, purely just because it came from the place of this metaphor that I mentioned earlier, and actually I thought it was enhancing the character of Laurence rather than lessening it, because I was so naive when I sleepwalked into this, I'll hold my hands up to that. But I thought "Puppets are amazing, we're gonna make Laurence a puppet, the audience will invest in him, it'll be fab", so I thought it was a gift I was giving Laurence, I didn't realise that it was this.

TP: So knowing what you know now, might you consider that?

AO: Yeah, I'm really curious to see all sorts of versions of this play. I would love to see a version where they get an autistic actor if anyone wants to do it, but that's not what we did for this production.

Audience Member 4: My original question was going to be: did you write the play knowing the puppet would be the autistic character? Yes you did.

AO: I did.

Audience Member 4: Does anyone have a view in the panel as to what the reaction would likely have been in the public eye were a non-autistic actor asked to play an autistic role?

DS: That's a really interesting question. I mean, I think there might have been a similar controversy to be honest. I don't know what you guys... yeah, that's my feeling. There's many arguments for and against going different ways with it. A lot of the time when we were talking about it early on, it was like the alternative would be to not do the play and not tell the story, so then do you take that course and then sort of censor yourself, censor Alex's work, or do you go "No, we're gonna tell the story that we want to," and that's what we did.

TP: I'm going to read another one of the submitted questions. This is from Tom Clements, who is autistic, and has a profoundly autistic sibling. He says: "Why do you think it is that so many verbally and intellectually able autistic self-advocates are so hostile to portrayals of severe autism? I and many others who write about stark and sometimes painful realities of living with severe autism with my sibling have been routinely harassed on social media and we ourselves, even being autistic, are accused of dis-ableism. It's a bizarre phenomenon and one I feel is

leading to the marginalisation of severe autism in popular discourse. Inevitably, this means that mildly autistic people for whom autism is more about identity than disability, hog the narrative of what it means to be autistic.”

AO: I’ve had so many emails from parents who have severely autistic kids who have said something like that, and this whole thing has highlighted to me that there is a divide between severely autistic people and people on the higher functioning end of the spectrum...

DS: I think that, and it’s a horrible thing to say, there is this kind of, “you have it worse than I have it”, there’s a sort of virtual points system where, and it’s not just with disability, it’s all across racism, sexism, sexuality, it’s all this sort of diversity thing in society at the moment, we can be very precious about how hard we have it, our hardships. And of course everyone has their story and their hardships, but I think one of the things to that question, one of the base explanations towards that is obviously non-verbal autistic people, they can’t communicate in the same way, so they don’t have as much of a voice, so we say that verbally autistic people are hogging the narrative, well because they can. Unfortunately, because of Twitter - I keep going back to Twitter - but it’s an outlet that potentially severely autistic non-verbal can’t necessarily access in the same way.

TP: Well, to that point, somebody else submitted, Tanya Melnyczuk. She says that she does recommend various non-speaking autistic writers, bloggers, and activists. Emma Zurcher-Long, Ido Kedar, Tito Mukhopadhyay, Amy Sequenzia, Peyton Goddard, Barb Rentenbach, Benjamin McGann, Philip Reyes and Mel Baggs. So these people do write more from that perspective and are worth looking into.

Okay, another audience question.

Audience Member 5: It might just be a flat no, but it seems very much about the parents more than the carer, which is where your experience is. Was there a version where it was more from the carer’s point of view or where you learned more about the carer?

TP: I think Michael would like that, yes?

MF: I’m funding a one-man show, actually about *Gary*.

(Laughter)

AO: And his cat!

(Laughter.)

AO: No, there wasn’t, no, because - and I said to Michael when we were casting this - look, this is the worst part in this play. All you do is go like “mm, yeah and um”.

MF: There's really no perfect answer.

AO: I was interested in the family dynamic in terms of the story, but I put a lot of myself in it, my bad break-ups, my bad relationships.

MF: I felt like that's a real strength of it, that you don't know that much about Gary, like, he has a life outside. He comes in, he has to remain professional in this alien space, and they're talking about really intimate things and their deepest, darkest thoughts and Gary has to remain the placater, and he can't get too invested, and it happens by accident that he makes this extraordinary relationship with this little boy that he wants to turn his whole life around. And ultimately, he's disposable, he has to leave, he has to cut ties because he has no place being there. I find his sort of absence in the play really interesting. We don't know much about him. It says a lot about what it is to be a carer. You devote your whole life to a relationship, to this family, and then ultimately, it has to be just a job.

TP: So following on from that, a question submitted by C L Lynch, who is autistic and also has autistic family members. She's not so concerned about the puppet but really about the message of the play with regards to the parents and carer. From what I can tell she has not seen the production. She says, from what she's read the parents and carer speak about Laurence in front of him as if he is not there and even make fun of him - I don't think they make fun of him so don't worry about that -

MF: They haven't seen it so -

TP: No, but, yeah.

MF:... People can see it, I really want to hear from them, hear their immediate responses to it. Being on the inside of a rehearsal room, feeling really worried about the show, we're trying to make a piece of theatre really sensitively and now is the time that's really interesting, we really wanna hear people in the room, seeing their initial responses.

TP: But this person couldn't be here for whatever reason, so.

MF: Just feel like we're talking about...

(Loud laughter and applause)

Audience Member 6: I thought it was brilliant.

(Applause)

TP: Okay.

SL: Let's answer that, though.

DS: What was the question?

TP: Okay, the concern she has is there might be a belief that non-verbal autistic people cannot understand what goes on around them when, in fact, the majority do understand what they're hearing, but they're not able to respond. So do you think the play makes clear to the audience how toxic the environment is for Laurence?

SL: I think it does, one hundred per cent, but also there is that very fine line isn't there, of, we're doing a play, you have to have exposition, have conversations and stuff like that, we're not doing a voyeuristic piece of really, like, it's not Big Brother, you're not looking at a camera, at a house, to a certain extent, there is that kind of line that you walk of - of course there are certain things that may not necessarily happen but actually I think most of it... it's the last night, this pressure cooker, we're seeing a series of arguments that probably in real time happen over a week, or you might get one of those a night, but for the purposes of plays...

TP: Of a drama, yep.

Audience Member 7: Why are you fielding questions from people that haven't seen the play? I find that a little bit offensive actually. Do they have a right to comment on something you haven't seen?

AO: There are some people who can't see it because of their autism.

Audience Member 7: Yes, but they should be taking neutral stances.

SL: I think that's an interesting point though, isn't it? Because I think emotionally it's still something that they are completely valid to feel, and if they have questions about it, too right they should ask, and I think some of them...

Audience Member 7: Asking is one thing, and creating a controversy from... before the play even opened, I think is very contentious. I think it's wrong that all of you were put through that nightmare, and it was a nightmare.

TP: I appreciate what you're saying, and I work with theatre people and I know many of these theatremakers and I have great sympathy with what you're saying, and I hate what they've gone through, I've received a very tiny bit of it myself, just for saying that I was doing this event. But at the same time, we do need to appreciate that this is not the same as other situations or plays when I do these Q&As. I have not done this before where I felt that it is necessary to be -

Audience Member 7: Isn't it strange that the National Autistic Society gave their recommendation, and certain things have changed in the play, and then all of a sudden when the controversy blew up, they withdrew their support?

TP: I don't work for the National Autistic Society and they aren't here to answer for themselves -

Audience Member 7: That's what's been reported, that the National Autistic Society cannot support this play, because of the use of the puppet.

DS: I mean, we are absolutely not here to make war with any sort of society, particularly not them, but we have learnt that, to speak for myself, I've personally learnt from people I've spoke to, from the parents that they haven't necessarily been as supported by that organisation as they wanted to have been. It's interesting to learn about the multi-faceted world of these organisations, these charities, and there's a lot of conflicting ideas within this community so it's very difficult I think to start asking those questions.

Audience Member 7: I thought the play was good.

TP: I'll come to you, but you've been so patient.

Audience Member 8: First, I just want to say thank you. I think it's a beautifully, wonderfully... performed piece of theatre. I came partly... I have an eleven-year-old godson and his nine-year-old brother who are both profoundly autistic and non-verbal and started residential school in the last year so I was fascinated, before I'd read about the controversy, just to see a play feel so close to home. I would kind of echo a disappointment that I've had some unhelpful interactions with the National Autistic Society through working with an adult with high-functioning autism... I just think it's a shame that no one came to actually see what the end product is. They could come anonymously, hopefully maybe there's someone here tonight. I hope there is.

TP: Is there anyone here from the National Autistic Society?

(Laughter as Hugh stands up.)

TP: Sorry, carry on.

Audience Member 8: I've been thinking of my own godson. And, of course, if you know one person with autism you know one person with autism. But I cannot conceive how, knowing a little bit about theatre, an eleven-year-old with that particular type of autism could possibly be expected to even function in an environment like this with so much sensory overload. Again, I thought the puppetry was absolutely stunning.

TP: Did you have a question, or just that comment?

Audience Member 8: Just to talk about the NAS but we've done that.

TP: I'm gonna go in the back, and then to you. Yep.

Audience Member 9: I thought it was beautifully done. I think that it's a fantastic way of representing people who are marginalised. I think you've done it in a beautiful way. It's so upsetting to me that anyone would feel like they weren't being represented, because I think that is very much what you're doing in a very truthful, beautiful way. Fantastic. For anyone who could not see it, can't be here, have you put any - and I know this is like, so expensive and ridiculous - but have you thought about filming it in a way that would be accessible to people who can't necessarily come to the theatre to see it?

DS: I'll take your question to my producer, over there.

TP: Paul, are there any plans to film it?

Paul Virides: Not for public release at the moment, it's something we can consider but I think the thing about filming theatre is, it's never the same [as being there].

Audience Member 9: Absolutely. I think it would just, in terms of, because I think it's terrible that you're getting abuse from people not because they're involved but because they can't come and see it. They do not have an actual opinion that's formed in reality, and what they're seeing, they can't actually then react to the thing in front of them and at least alleviate a little bit of that tension.

TP: I do just want to add - thank you so much for that - that some people who have been responding on Twitter who are autistic have been to see it, and have gone to great efforts to come and see it, and have posted some really balanced and critical, but truthful comments, so they did come to judge and they did in a way that was genuine... But related to the filming, another question that's been asked a lot of times, including by Gemma Coggin. "What is the situation with relaxed performances and why isn't every performance relaxed?" And for those who might not know, what does that mean, a relaxed performance?

DS: A relaxed performance is a convention that we have in theatre where we, the things that might be more uncomfortable for someone with a disability or people in a situation where they want to access theatre but they can't necessarily watch, they don't want to watch the show in its heightened state, which is lighting at full, the sound at full, everything the actors are doing in full. We also do relaxed performances where we adjust a lot of the technical aspects, to make it more accessible. But those performances take quite a lot of planning, quite a lot of resources. They're really important for us to do, but there also has to be a demand for them. So just to put it into context, a big West End show funded to the hilt, would probably do one a year. We've got a three-week run, and we're gonna do one on Saturday, and absolutely if we can do more, we absolutely will. But it is a supply and demand thing, because it is a modified version of the show.

SL: So in this instance the lighting won't go as much, the lights will be at half light, my overloud screams will be way down, the attacks would be less severe. In a sense they are way more accessible, but it's not quite the - you don't get the show.

TP: Okay. Yes, here.

Audience Member 10: At the beginning, you asked the question of the audience, how many of them are either autistic or had autistic family members, and frankly that was the minority, just basically -

TP: Can I just say, I did also ask who prefers not to answer, and many people do prefer not to answer.

Audience Member 10: But here, I didn't see many hands raised. My point is that most of the people watching this play would not necessarily have the experience or relate to it, so when writing it or acting it, did you consider the impact of this on people with no children or non-disabled children? I appreciate that a lot of it was to address parents who have to deal with it, but you know, I find it very interesting from the perspective when this is a new subject, something you're not quite familiar with, and how you relate to that and what you learn from it, and when you put yourself into perspective. I can really relate to Charlie's character obviously. What on earth would you do in a situation like this when that has never been something you've ever had to consider? So I am just so speaking with people who have nothing to do with autism, the impact of your play with those.

AO: It's great, yeah, I mean any writer wants to bring an issue forward and to make an audience unaware of that issue empathise with that issue, if that makes you think *oh, that friend I have has a disabled child, maybe I'll just phone them up and ask if they need anything* I think that's brilliant.

Audience Member 11: Can I say, it rang home to me. I have a severely autistic brother, and my mother must have gone through the same feelings when she decided that it would be best for him to be looked after elsewhere, in the 60's it was actually not a lovely place with horse riding... So for me it really brought to life how she must have wrangled with those feelings and my father who didn't want him to be institutionalised or go into a home. The arguments they must have had, because I was only seven at the time, I didn't realise anything like this was going on. As for the puppet, for me it actually made me think about - I actually, I came to the play because there was a puppet, and I thought: I wonder how they're going to do this. And for me, it was like my brother is in a different world to me so that's what it represented to me. He's there, and we think he can understand us, but he's like in a different world, so that's how I felt the puppet was. I thought it was great, I really enjoyed it.

TP: Thank you very much Any other hands in the audience?

Audience Member 12: How long does it take to learn the script?

DS: They're still learning!

CB: The rehearsal period is for three weeks, so we worked with our script in our hand for a week or two, and then we put the script to the side, and out you go, but it's probably, it's over the course of three weeks. I think what always amazes me with reading a script and then when you actually get in a room, we always say it's like the amount of meat you can get off a bone, you know, it's like there's always so much to discover and moments to find, but for me when I first read it, it felt very powerful and very honest... It's upsetting to do, it's upsetting when I talk about it, when I speak to people about it, I get very emotional. I've spent a lot of time speaking to parents, and it's - I'm learning every day about autism, and it's a fascinating world and I've met some incredible people. This journey I think, for all of us, it's fair to say has been enlightening, and emotional.

TP: Anybody else want to add to that?

MF: I think actually along the lines of what that lady was saying there, that sort of world that coming into this job I knew not very much about, I knew that the things that resonated with me are about parents and caring for someone in a completely different world to what I've experienced... you know, you cherish that as an actor, you come into work and try and get into it. I wanted to be authentic to what it was like to be a carer, because I think they're often overlooked as well, and the biggest challenge for me was to make a relationship with a puppet seem viable because, if that didn't work, god knows it would be a long hour and twenty minutes. But it has been incredibly enriching, it's been quite scary talking about it, I want to say the right things. I'm always learning about the right way to talk about autism because it's completely complex and multi-faceted, and it has been really enriching and it's made me think more about what it means to be an actor. We should be making - what British theatre should be doing. It's important that theatre is challenging people, and yeah I for one feel really lucky to be doing it, and you've just gotta go *well, we'll see what people make of it*. Sure, this happened, we started a conversation, the conversation might not be the right way to tell the story, but it's a conversation and now we know that, it could be the wrong way of doing it, but the conversation is happening and we're glad to be involved in that.

SL: Can I ask... this might be risky but I do think it's important. Is there anyone here that doesn't like it and does want to say? Great, and I will say this now, no one defend it, because we all had [a chance to] everyone's said positive stuff, so you are allowed to say why [you don't like it].

TP: Do you want to say?

Audience Member 13: Yeah, so I come from a hauntingly similar situation where I have two profoundly autistic brothers who are in residential school. On top of that, I have been a carer in schools and self-employed in family homes, so I do have quite personal connections with this. But I do wonder if the representations of the family are quite harmful because they do only depict where - some of these moments can be really beautiful but I didn't see any of that. It was just all harmful, almost burdenlike, which I didn't like.

Audience Member 14: Can I respond to that in a way that's not at all... I don't want to take away from what you've said, so my response to that is as they said -

TP: Are you a carer?

Audience Member 14: Yes, I have a younger sister with Down Syndrome and I've been a carer in a residency with adults with learning disabilities... As the team was saying, this is one story, and you are exactly right that the problem is this is only one story, and as Gary/Michael was saying, this is the start of the conversation which needs to lead to more work of this kind. Because if there's many different pieces to look at, you're going to see much more of the whole picture. So, of course, it's a problem that it's only showing one story, but it's only one play so you know, it's so difficult to show many different stories. So I think you're right but I think the solution is that more people need to make more plays like this, rather than to try and cram everything into one play.

TP: I think I'm right in saying there is actually a fairly newly founded festival for theatre written by autistic writers, I think that's right, and I'll look it up and share it. Did you want to say any more on that?

Audience Member 13: I completely do applaud that this is happening and the conversation is starting, but I just feel that a lot of things, and this is not to insult anybody, but I do feel a lot was done for dramatic effect, rather than to put across a real point.

Audience Member 15: I would disagree with that completely as a mother of a child with autism, the points that were put through are very very valid... feelings of guilt, feelings of turmoil, what's the right thing to do for your child. I think the majority of people here are talking about sisters or brothers or relations, but as a mother of someone with autism, I thought the story was about the parents and how - the puppet for me wasn't of much interest - it was how the parents actually dealt with it and went through everyday life with that turmoil.

TP: And did it feel authentic to your experience?

Audience Member 15: Absolutely, my son doesn't have those difficulties but is still... Whether it's Down Syndrome, whether it's someone with severe autism, it is not unique to autism, it is a unique story about parents trying to deal with a child that doesn't fit in traditional confines... Doesn't conform to society in the way society thinks it should.

Audience Member 16: Can I just say...

TP: Yes, sorry, what's your name?

Audience Member 16: My name is Ron, and what you've got here for the last hour and a half is a snapshot of my life [Ron is the father who employed Alex Oates to look after his autistic son], I'm married to you [to Charlie Brooks], I love you [to Hugh Purves]...

(Laughter)

SL: You don't want less good Colin Farrell?

Audience Member 16: I want to say wow, thank you, everybody, all of you, for really capturing an hour and a half out of fifteen, eighteen, seventeen years of our life and bringing up into awareness in the most incredible way... I'm still shaking thinking about it, it's been amazing. Thank you for doing that, and also thank you...

(Applause)

Audience Member 16: Thank you for standing all of that Twitter feed mania. I know none of you signed up for that, but it's amazing that you've done this project, took a risk...

TP: And your son, presumably, he's not called Laurence...

Audience Member 16: He's not, he has a brother, I think he should have been played by a shadow, that would have been really controversial.

SL: [to Audience Member 13] Just because it's a different opinion to yours doesn't mean yours is wrong.

Audience Member 13: I didn't say it was, it's alright.

SL: But it's true, I guess it just sums up that point of going, you're telling a story, and you have to commit to telling one specific, and yes you're right, it does look at hardships, and if they upset you, and they don't feel right to you, we're so sorry, but at the same time, know that it's telling a story which others do connect with in a different way, that doesn't make it better for you, doesn't make it any more right in your...

Audience Member 13: I'm more than happy for these stories, like I'm elated that these stories are finally coming to the stage, but I also feel like representations of disability have been not great in theatre historically/ And I wonder if this is the best building block to put on top of that tower.

TP: Thank you for raising that, I'm going to go to the person next to you.

Audience Member 17: This was my second time seeing the show in the same week, and I am really interested in unpacking it and realising why I, from my position, disagree with some things. I'm into all that kind of analysis mumbo jumbo, and I bought my first ticket before I knew about the puppet, and I think that I am really glad that these sorts of things are being discussed. I specifically came back tonight to be here for this discussion, and I think that the problem isn't necessarily with the one specific story that's being told now, it's just that there is such a lack of

stories full stop. So when there is one story, it does feel difficult to watch, when it is difficult, but that is a truthful representation, it's just that there is such a lack of lots of different varieties of that story.

AO: What I'd like to say as well is, I'm really pleased to hear all the autistic voices, and I'd love to see new autistic work. One of the things that I want to see coming out of this, because it's afforded me a brief five-minute platform, is how it can help autistic writers.

TP: So, I'm just pre-warning you that these guys have been so generous and I know they want to talk all night but the theatre is telling me that we've got just a few minutes more. So, for everybody who still has their hand up, I want to hear all the questions to see if we can answer them.

Audience Member 18: Obviously we've spoken a lot about representation this evening, which is really important across autism and many other disabilities. Do you think the backlash to this particular story will lead to more writers being scared to tell those particular stories?

TP: Okay, so before you answer that - did the reaction make the subject toxic? And that was a question sent in by other people as well - can we come back to that and hear the other questions first?

Audience Member 19: I don't know, I'm just sort of thinking I don't know if one can make a successful piece of theatre without having conflict and without asking difficult questions that don't have any easy answers. For me this piece of theatre did exactly what you want, you laugh, cry, have things to think about, so yeah, just to say well done.

TP: Thank you, were there other hands? I didn't want to exclude anybody. So, to the question of this lady, do you worry that, because of the comments, could it scare people off tackling a subject like this?

AO: I hope not. It's quite possible, it's been... we're not playing ratings, people who live with autism have it far worse than us, but the last two weeks it's been really difficult. I hope that doesn't scare people off. My big fear is the implications on puppetry, that if it was decided due to this production that you could not portray a person, who is the only one of that minority, by a puppet, then that would be a landmark thing in the history of theatre, so I don't want that to happen. I think it does have implications, but I hope people can rise above them.

TP: Does anyone else want to answer that? Any concerns about being scared off either personally or for others?

DS: Yeah I get it, it's not about playing the victim. Any kind of visceral passionate response is valid. I just think that we have these platforms that don't help that and will potentially scare a lot of theatremakers off and writers off these subjects because I think it's difficult. These people [pointing at company] will tell you how hard it's been just to make a piece of theatre, whatever

it's about is difficult, on this kind of budget, on this scale. This is new writing, it's just difficult from the start. Add to that, writers who want to try tackle really difficult issues, ask really difficult questions, I think it could become really daunting.

TP: I'm gonna add to this something that got sent in and has been raised regarding the outrage on Twitter and social media. Some people have picked up on how the team have responded or not been able to respond. I think it's important to note, this is a small production, a small team, and that they're trying to put on a new play, in very difficult circumstances, and they don't have a marketing person or a dedicated social media person. I know they feel disappointed that they weren't able to engage more, during this process, but we hope that by sharing this we can address some of that.

So finally. I said in the beginning, I was gonna ask did anyone learn anything, if anyone wants to answer that quickly. Have you learnt anything?

DS: Firstly I've learnt how amazing actors are...

(Applause)

AO: How compassionate parts of the autism community are, definitely, I've had so many lovely messages of support from parents and autistic people, so thank you to those.

SL: I've learnt to stick to comedy and not do something serious. [laughter]

TP: Thank you all for staying. This has gone on quite a long time and I think we have to wrap up. Wait til the end and join me in a big round of applause for Charlie, Hugh, Michael, Simon, Alex, and Dominic.