



FIVE OBSERVATIONS OF OTHER PEOPLE (and one personal thing)

1

An actor with a dead-on impression of Jeremy Clarkson, speaking about his personal experiences and it being the first moment that clicked for me.

2

A member of staff (who will remain anonymous) ducking behind the Noffice curtain and under the all-seeing flamingo for a moment of respite.

3

Audiences flowing past each other, regular showgoers against colour-coded wristbands in one of the best bits of movement I've seen all week.

4

The contrast of a magenta-clad parking attendant against the yellow bus, a reminder that the real world is still functioning outside of this wonderful, chaotic bubble.

5

The spirit and perseverance on show, fighting their way through powercuts and broken dynamos.

+1

A change in myself. The sense that everything will be okay and not just because I have glitter on my face and a newfound ability to chat to strangers.

On Autism and Theatre

I am really bad at doing facial expressions when acting. I couldn't do them to save my life. It's either not enough or too much. I can never really seem to hack it, feigning emotions on my face during performance. I am surprised there isn't a theatrical school of faces – we already have extensive ones for voice and physicality. But then perhaps it comes easy to most people. As someone with high-functioning autism, I've been less proficient in this area.

This is not an uncommon issue for people who are on the autistic spectrum. A 2018 academic analysis from the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) of various scientific studies on the production of facial expressions in ASD affirmed that "Their facial expressions are [...] judged to be lower in quality and are expressed less accurately." It clarifies however that "participants with ASD do not express emotions less intensely."

So it's kind of almost ironic that many autistic people endeavour to work as actors, a profession that involves strong manipulation of emotional expression. Dan Sanders, one of the actors in *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING*, recognises this difficulty: "If you haven't experienced a certain emotion then how the hell do you know what the expression's going to be like? I need to feel an emotion for myself before I can bring that to a character in a believable realistic way."

Sanders performs an uncanny impression of Jeremy Clarkson in the show. Staying in character, he describes his real self as akin to a car: "In the engine, all his wiring and neurons are all mixed up, resulting in a casual brand of madness, known as autism, but he's good at hiding it."

"The reason why we included that was because it was just one line," he explains, "and I didn't want it to be a big thing. Autism is a big part of who I am, but it's just a small section, and I feel I'm shaped more by my experiences than by any sort of biological precedent going on in my brain."

Sanders first got into theatre to build his social skills: "I joined this club called Masked Youth that was run by a woman named Ursula. The best thing that she did was what she didn't do – she didn't treat me any differently to any of the other kids. Theatre for me is this unifying thing, and in that place, in that time, it didn't matter who you were – you were expected to muck in and crack on."

For one of the female creatives at the festival (who wishes to remain anonymous), her autistic traits have their strengths: "Because I have to sometimes think through people's body language and social situations I think I've got quite an analytical brain when it comes to humans which helps in theatre particularly when working at a character level."

During the 'authenticity' discussion at the festival, the issue of representation of autistic characters on stage and who gets to do so was raised and directed at playwright Simon Stephens, whose acclaimed adaptation of Mark Haddon's 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has recently returned to the West End. "I think with any sort of condition or any sort of minority group," reflects Sanders, "it should be a plus to the character not a definition of the character. They are who they are – and they happen to be autistic. What matters is that they are a person – they have defining traits, [and] autism is a part of that mix."

So what kind of representation would he like to see on the stage? "We've seen a lot of autistic characters. What I would like to see is autistic performers chatting about the condition in and of itself, so perhaps creating a show in which they do play themselves – where we have real autistic people just making what they want to make. It is their creative vision."

"I think ensuring that we have more diverse representation," answers the female creative, "having autistic women, people of colour who are autistic among others could start to break down the stigma around people with ASD. I personally would also like more representation of people with a level of autism or a style of autism that isn't the norm that's often portrayed. Not every autistic person behaves the same way."

There is a value to a collective community of autistic creatives. "I think by having these companies of specifically disabled performers," says Sanders "we don't need to say anything because everybody kind of already knows and we can move on to the more interesting questions." But he argues that it's equally important to allow integration into predominantly neurotypical creative teams: "It shows that we can interact with everyone else – we're creating an integrated community into the larger theatrical whole."

By extension, I think neurotypical people should realise how ordinary autistic people actually are. We are not simply special or vulnerable, and we are absolutely not infantile – we just want to be taken seriously.