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## April is Autism Awareness Month

Autism is a "spectrum condition" that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees. One characteristic sometimes associated with autism is more sensitivity than usual to environmental stimuli, such as noise, light, clothing or temperature. Please read on about two UPAF Member Groups that have used arts-related programming to assist individuals with autism and sensory sensitivity.

Milwaukee Ballet's *The Nutcracker* makes magical memories for families all over Wisconsin. In 2016, Milwaukee Ballet shared the magic of the production with new families when it hosted its first sensory-friendly performance of the holiday classic.



Milwaukee Ballet partnered with Marcus Center for the Performing Arts and Autism Speaks to make *The Nutcracker* more accessible for children and adults affected by autism and other sensitivity issues. Many of these families were nervous to go to the performance before because the noise levels and crowds presented a challenge.

By making small adjustments to the performance, including using pre-recorded music to control the volume, taking out the pyrotechnics and designating a quiet area, Milwaukee Ballet helped patrons with sensitivity issues feel more confident they could attend the show in a welcoming and positive environment.

More than 400 guests joined Milwaukee Ballet for the festive occasion. The responses were overwhelmingly positive! Here are a few comments that Milwaukee Ballet received from parents:

*"Tonight's performance was nothing short of magical. Thank you so much for adding a performance that let me share my favorite ballet with my son. He had the BEST time and in turn, because he was comfortable and accepted as himself, I did too." - J.*

Schroeder

*"This was such a magical night for us all. Josie has been so excited about coming to The Nutcracker. I have never seen her so engaged. What a blessing! Thank you all. The performers were so patient and kind to us." - C. Enockson*

Milwaukee Ballet's next sensory-friendly performance of *The Nutcracker* will be at 6 p.m. on Dec. 20, 2017. For more details, visit [www.milwaukeeballet.org](http://www.milwaukeeballet.org) - tickets go on sale July 22.



First Stage's recent production of *Mockingbird* was a play about an 11 year old girl on the autism spectrum. The lead character, Caitlin, used to rely on her older brother to help make sense of the world, but now that he's gone she's all on her own. With the help of her father, a reading buddy and an advisor, she begins to embrace and understand emotions.



*Mockingbird*, based on the National Book Award-winning novel by Kathryn Erskine, is about how the perseverance of one girl can change a community, and how things aren't always black and white.



As part of its Next Steps program, First Stage held a "sensory-friendly" performance on April 8, designed for families with kids who need sensory accommodations.

At this performance there was a smaller audience size, reduced lighting and sound, social stories, quiet areas and more. This production was in partnership with the Autism

Society of Southeastern Wisconsin.

First Stage offers 3 to 4 "sensory friendly" performances each season which all include special modifications to make a trip to the theater as welcoming as possible.

First stage also has Sensory Kits available for all performances which are backpacks containing items that help provide comfort to audience members with sensory sensitivities. Each kit includes a social story outlining the theater experience, noise-canceling earmuffs and an assortment of quiet fidget toys. The Sensory Kits are available during all public and school shows, and can be checked out from the House Manager for the duration of the performance.

First Stage received an outpouring of positive feedback from families in the autism community. Here is feedback that they received from patrons:

*"I went to Mockingbird with my daughter's school today. It was truly amazing. The actress that played Caitlin did a phenomenal job. I worked with children with autism for 15 years, and her portrayal was spot on."*



*"This play was an emotional and powerful experience! Emily Harris did an amazing portrayal of an autistic child! As a first grade teacher of almost 30 years, who has had students on the spectrum, it really touched me."*

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***Thank you for supporting UPAF and the Greater Milwaukee area's performing arts groups!***

The opportunities available to the Milwaukee community are making a difference in so many lives.

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UPAF, 301 W. Wisconsin Ave., Suite 600, Milwaukee, WI 53203

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