



Taking It on the Road

Mobile Theatre for Children with Autism and other Sensory Sensitivities

Stephen Santa, Artistic Director, Omaha Community Playhouse

The VROOM! Mobile Sensory Theatre started as a spark of an idea three years ago in a coffee shop. At the time, I was the Co-Founder and Artistic Director of Jumping Jack Theater in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, creating immersive theatrical experience for children with developmental disabilities and other sensory sensitivities.

Like many theaters in 2020, we were brainstorming how we could continue to serve our audiences during the pandemic. We'd learned through our years of touring to schools, commu-

participatory sense-making are important tools in growth and development. When a child has severe disabilities, opportunities for sense-making may be diminished, which leaves them more dependent on participatory sense-making than other children." [Full article at aact.org/sensory]

A New Opportunity

After touring in western Pennsylvania during the summer of 2020, a new opportunity arose. In 2021 I was hired as the Artistic Director of the Omaha Community Playhouse (OCP). Only a month into my new role and life in Nebraska, a local autism advocate (and parent of an autistic child) reached out to help bring the Mobile Sensory Theatre to Omaha. Through a remarkable fundraising effort by OCP's development team, this experience is provided to families and schools at no cost. This was an opportunity to serve a new community and create something even better than the initial concept. The trailer was replaced by a cargo van, the interior of the van was gutted, and a magical world of lights and sound was created inside by OCP's remarkable staff (who were also busy creating 10 other productions that year.) Four actors were cast and trained, and we launched the VROOM! Mobile Sensory Theatre in Omaha in April of this year.



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The Mobile Sensory Theatre arrives at home in Omaha, ready to take a trip to the stars

nity events, and festivals that there were challenges for our audiences simply to arrive at the theater, let alone experience the actual presentation. From that initial conversation—and several lattes—the Mobile Sensory Theatre was born.

This highly interactive, and exploratory experience between one child and one actor first took place in the back of a cargo trailer that we would send directly to a family's home.

The immersive, participatory approach is key. According to an article by researchers at the Center for Literacy and Disability Studies, University of North Carolina, "Both sense-making and

The experience inside the van—called "Starshine!"—is a 30-to 40-minute sensory-enriched adventure to the stars that provides an intimate theatrical experience for one audience member and up to two caregivers, parents, or siblings. During the show, kids enjoy the magic of the sky, gaze at constellations, dance with asteroids, hear soothing sounds, and even lend a helping hand as "Star Keepers," so that every star can shine its brightest.

It's an environment designed for exploration and relaxation, where children are encouraged to explore in a way that is most comfortable for them. They discover multiple textures, calming sounds and lighting, and even explore their sense of taste and smell.



An audience member, also known as the "Recruit" explores the stars inside of the Mobile Sensory Theatre with Aster the Starkeeper

In time, we plan to create additional experiences that will tour Omaha and beyond. These shows will be created through residencies and workshops in autism-support classrooms, and with the help of actors, designers, and writers with disabilities.


The Omaha Community Playhouse has made a commitment to provide the community with inclusive and innovative theatre experiences where everyone can feel a sense of belonging. The VROOM! Mobile Sensory Theatre is an important step towards that goal, and I look forward to seeing it continue to grow and develop. It's my dream to collaborate with other theatres to provide them with the tools to establish this program in their community, knowing that it empowers this underserved audience to experience art and theatre in ways they never thought possible.

[View the VROOM! Mobile Sensory Theatre FAQ document at aact.org/vroom]

Omaha Community Playhouse Artistic Director Stephen Santa is an award-winning theatre director whose work has been seen across the United States and internationally. Santa is the co-founder and former artistic director of Jumping Jack Theater—a children's theatre production company that creates original sensory theatre experiences for audiences with developmental disabilities and sensory sensitivities. His Omaha Community Playhouse directorial credits include Kinky Boots, School of Rock, and this season's sold-out production of RENT. Santa developed and directed VROOM! Mobile Sensory Theatre, which will tour homes and community organizations throughout Nebraska. He may be contacted at ssanta@omahaplayhouse.com



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