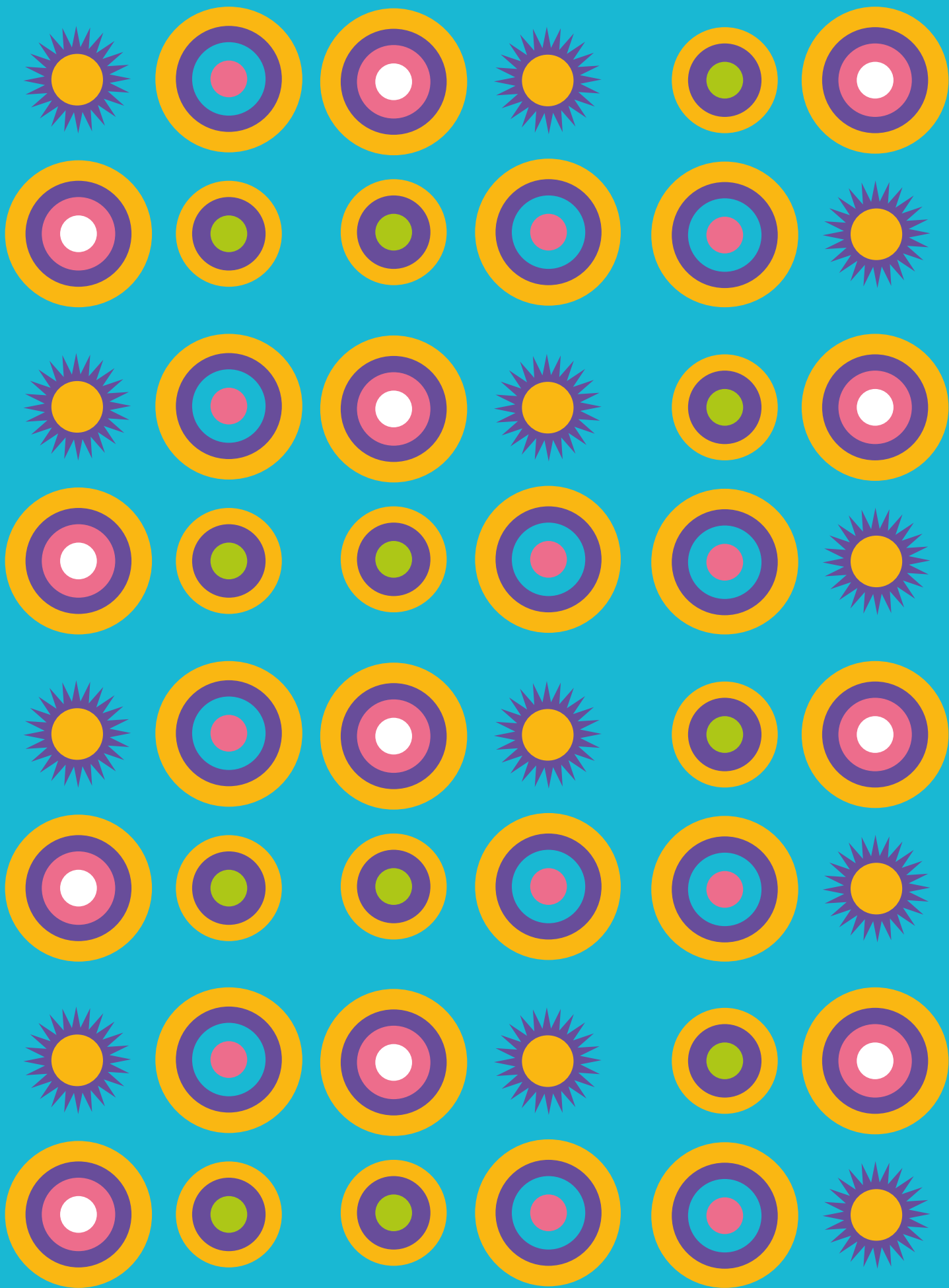


HEART creating recovery BEAT



Theatre as a Tool
for the Inclusion
of Young People
with Autism in
Peru during
the Covid-19
Pandemic

Executive Summary



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the Covid-19 Pandemic

February 2022

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Arts Council England

Queen Mary University of London

The [World Health Organisation](#) describes autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as “*a group of conditions characterized by some level of impairment in social behaviour, communication, and language, and a restricted, stereotyped repetitive repertoire of interests and activities*” (WHO, 2021). It is estimated that one in 160 children suffer from ASD worldwide. Autism symptoms vary from case to case, even though they are usually identified in three areas: deterioration of social activity, communication issues, repetitive and/or negative behaviours.

By mid-2018, 4,528 people in Peru had been diagnosed with autism according to the National Registry of People with Disabilities kept by the [National Council for the Integration of Persons with Disability](#) (CONADIS — *Consejo Nacional para la Integración de la Persona con Discapacidad*), which represented 2% of people with disabilities registered in Peru. According to the Department of Mental Health, within Peru’s Ministry of Health, there were 15,625 autistic people in the country in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit people with autism spectrum disorders particularly hard.

The Heartbeat Project is an alliance that brings together academic institutions and artistic organisations. [People’s Palace Projects/PPP](#) (a research centre at [Queen Mary University of London](#)) and the [Centre of Excellence in Chronic Diseases/CRONICAS](#) (a research centre at the Cayetano Heredia University in Peru), British company Flute Theatre and Teatro La Plaza in Lima co-created a study of the impact and efficacy of the transfer of a virtual theatre methodology for working with autistic people from the UK to Peru.

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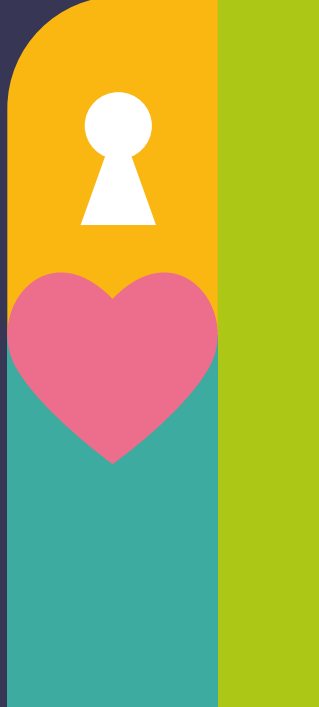
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INTRODUCTION



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Flute Theatre is a UK company set up and led by award-winning actor and director Kelly Hunter. For over two decades, they have developed and perfected the *Hunter Heartbeat Method*. This method uses plays by William Shakespeare and a series of theatre games to apply rhythm, language, and physical activities to engage and empower autistic people, some of whom have severe verbal communication impairment.

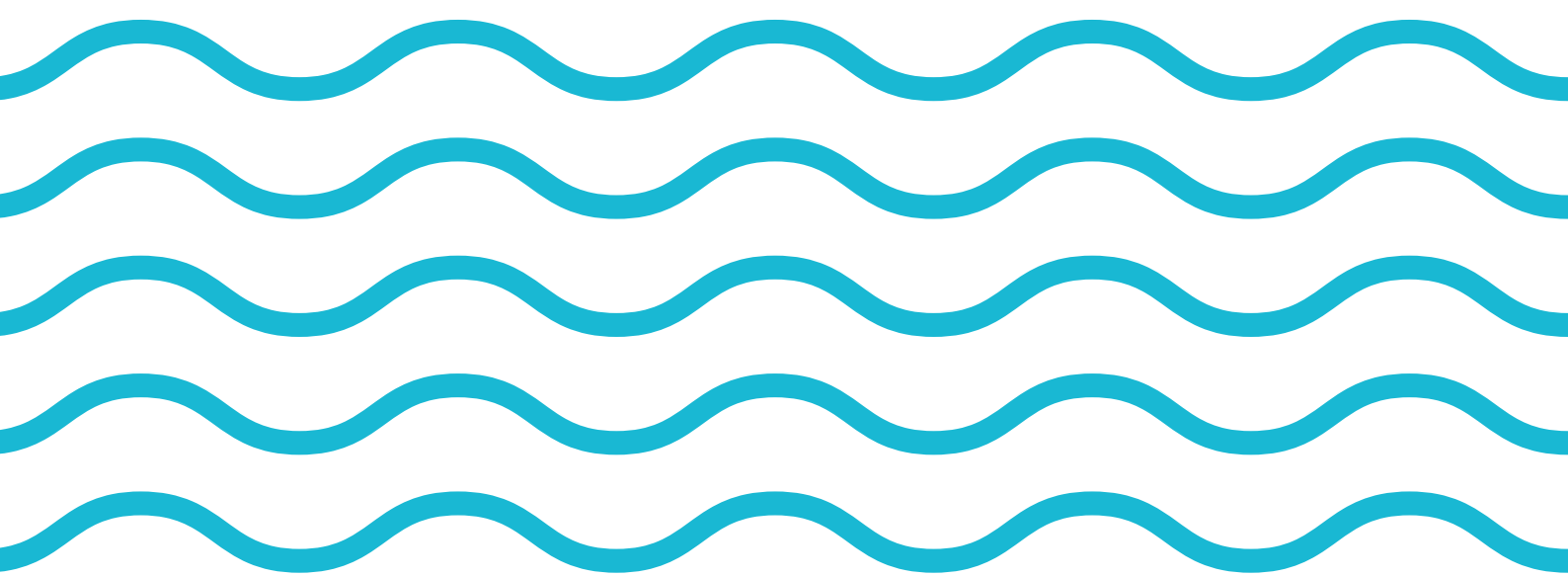
Teatro La Plaza is a Peruvian theatre company set up in 2003 and led by Chela De Ferrari. Located in Lima, its international programme combines classic and contemporary drama with a strong emphasis on supporting the development of new Peruvian writing. Between 2017-19, La Plaza created a production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with neurodiverse actors and for neurodiverse audiences.

People's Palace Projects brought Flute Theatre and Teatro La Plaza together in October 2020 for a series of virtual workshops which included a performance of Flute Theatre's online production of *Pericles*. In December 2020, Flute Theatre performed an online production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with autistic participants who had been invited by Teatro La Plaza. This collaboration resulted in "Heartbeat, Creating Recovery" (*Late Corazón, Creando Recuperación*), which received funding from the UK's **Arts and Humanities Research Council** (AHRC) as part of a cohort of six research projects looking at the impacts of the pandemic on the lives of people with special abilities in the Global South.



AIMS OF THE PROJECT

- To **assess the impact and efficacy** of the adaptation of the *Hunter Heartbeat Method* to a Peruvian context.
- To **identify the benefits** of the *Hunter Heartbeat Method* for autistic people and their families in Peru during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To **evaluate the possibility of leveraging the method** among public and private institutions and organisations dedicated to health, education, and the arts, while identifying potential obstacles and facilitators.



PROJECT STAGES

1. **Preparation** (February and March 2021): Planning the artistic activities with theatre companies, obtaining ethical approval, and seeking the consent and approval of participants and informers.
2. **Transfer** (April and May 2021): Sharing arts methods—sensory games and exercises to engage autistic people—from Flute Theatre to Teatro La Plaza while adapting them to the Peruvian context as part of the co-development of an online production based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Activities took place online in a space the two companies called a Digital Theatre Laboratory (DTL). The purpose of the DTL was to create a space to exchange knowledge, collaborate, and co-create.
3. **Dissemination** (May and June 2021): Disseminating the adapted methods to other arts organisations in Peru and other Latin American countries. Among these activities were the webinars, theatre game demonstrations, presentations of *The Tempest* and roundtable discussions with independent observers from civil society, arts organisations, and civil servants from different sectors: health, education, culture, and social inclusion.
4. **Research Activities** (May until July 2021): Throughout the transfer, daily sessions at the theatre companies were observed. Interviews and focus groups were conducted to collect the experiences of autistic people and their families who participated in the virtual theatre productions.

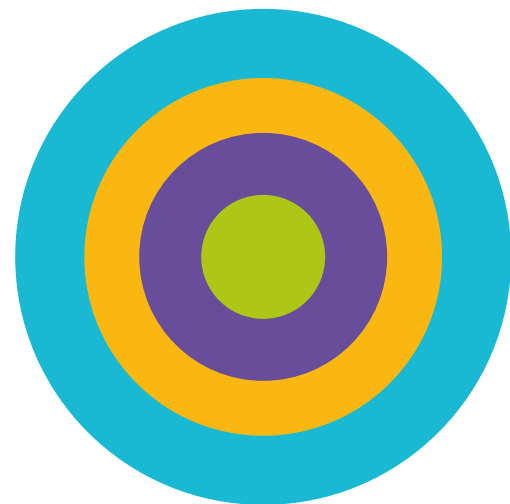
Participants and Informers

The case study included six types of participants and/or informers who, in one way or another, were involved with the DTL and/or the dissemination activities and had been invited to report their experience and give feedback through interviews or focus groups.

1. Young people with autism (6-26 years of age)
2. Family members (parents and guardians of autistic participants)
3. Directors and producers from both theatre companies
4. Actors from both theatre companies
5. Observers:

Members of civil society, education organisations, and the public sector in Peru

Members of arts organisations in Peru and Latin America

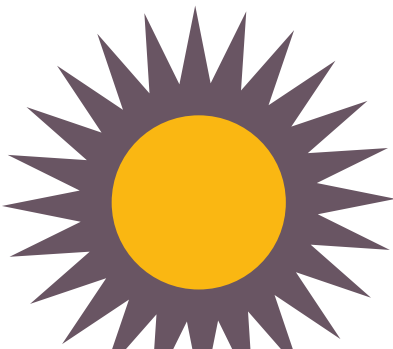


Participant Selection Process

Contact with autistic people and their families was mostly made through civil society organisations working with this population:

[Asociación Puno Corazón Azul](#), [Ann Sullivan](#), [Soy Autista ¿y qué?](#), [Centro Cerrito Azul](#), [Aspau Perú](#), [ETA Therapy Centre](#), and [Siempre Amanecer school](#).

Six actors from Peru were selected to participate in the transfer and dissemination stages after an online casting session conducted by the directors of Flute Theatre and Teatro La Plaza. The six actors from Flute Theatre had already been performing virtually with the theatre company for several months. The combined cast of 12 actors (male and female) were invited to participate in focus groups after the process to learn from and share their opinions and perspectives.



Research Procedures

The research procedures selected to collect information were:

- **Observations of the Digital Theatre Lab (DTL):** the research team observed between 3 to 6 hours a day of creative work, games, and presentations.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** 6 individual interviews were conducted with autistic participants, using images and videos as supporting materials. They were transcribed, coded, and analysed by the research team.
- **Focus Groups:** 10 focus group were organised with distinct groups of informers.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol, the consent forms, and all instruments were reviewed by the Ethics and Research Institutional Committee at [Cayetano Heredia University](#) in Peru and by Queen Mary University of London's Ethics and Research Committee (QMERC).



THE DIGITAL THEATRE LABORATORY (DTL)



TRANSFERRING THE HUNTER HEARTBEAT METHOD

The process of transferring the *Hunter Heartbeat Method* and co-creating a production of *The Tempest* brought challenges and opportunities for both theatre companies.

During the first weeks, La Plaza's actors had concerns about the method because they had no previous experience working with autistic people. In addition, it was their first time working together and they had expected to have a script as a starting point that could help structure their work. For Flute Theatre, it is important to perform with the body, practice playing the games, and rehearse with autistic

participants from the very beginning. Kelly Hunter tried to address these concerns by emphasising how important it was to focus on the present and not worry about situations that had not yet materialised, and to offer maximum energy and give one's best at each show.

During the DTL the language barrier between the two theatre companies was a challenge. The actors from La Plaza were listening to the interpretation of what Kelly Hunter was saying and, at times, they could not understand the instructions clearly.

There were also technological challenges during the Lab and the performances. Everyone needed a laptop, a microphone, a camera, good internet connection, and Zoom. Of all these resources, the greatest challenge was securing a reliable internet connection, which often forced the cast members to reorganise themselves and have a stand-in for an actor without an internet connection.

Project Accomplishments

Kelly Hunter commented that after the 4 weeks in which both theatre companies worked together, it was as if they had become a single theatre company with 12 actors who had overcome challenges and taken risks despite never having met within a physical space. She also celebrated the fact that the method had been effectively transferred and she trusts the Peruvian cast to carry on with the project.

CO-CREATING AND PERFORMING

Perspectives from Autistic Participants and Their Families

The families recognised and appreciated the work by the cast from both theatre companies and highlighted their commitment and ability to work from a perspective of inclusion. Their actions inspired confidence and allowed their children to feel welcome. They commented on the cast’s sensibility and humanity in the way they connected and communicated with their children, which allowed them to “enter into their world” and create a bond of friendship. One of the mothers expressed it this way:

I believe they [the actors] are special people. Only special people could make a connection through this [virtual] channel and reach out to the sensibility of these kids—kids who are not like us... We could say, kids who are different.



Family members of autistic participants engage with the play in three different ways:

1. **Trying to encourage autistic participants to play the games** – either by motivating them as they played or helping them perform the movements (i.e. taking their hands and making them move). This level of interaction was observed among family members of participants who have a more severe level of autism, as well as with younger participants.
2. **Supporting the participants** throughout the performance to remind them of or clarify something that they may not have understood.
3. **Simply watching and sharing the experience** with their child without any intervention whatsoever. This level of participation was observed among family members of participants who are teenagers or adults and act more independently.



Perspectives from the theatre companies

The producers at Flute Theatre emphasised how participants looked calm and like they were being entertained while playing the games, and how the families experienced the affection as their kids felt loved and seen for who they are. They also acknowledge that the families found an inclusive space at the Heartbeat Project, which they attribute to it being a place that offers them a loving environment of trust and acceptance.

The producers at Teatro La Plaza pointed out the need to belong among some of the participating families, and creating bonds was beneficial for them.

Perspectives from Observers

Representatives from civil society organisations (including arts and cultural groups) who attended the performances indicated that they enjoyed watching how participants effectively communicated remotely and the different possibilities that technology has to offer. A couple of organisations pointed out that they enjoyed seeing how a theatre play can be enhanced by the inclusion of Peruvian rhythms.

“All the arts - each and every one of them - are not only therapeutic, but they also promote growth. They are not there just to make us feel better. They actually promote growth for people to be present, to develop themselves as people... It’s as if the arts could take them, guide them towards growth, not only towards feeling good”. (Observer, Arts Organisation)

BENEFITS OF THE HEARTBEAT PROJECT



Benefits that were identified from the theatrical performances facilitated by the Heartbeat Project include:

FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

- **Enjoying theatre games:** At each performance, all the autistic participants showed that they enjoyed themselves by laughing and using their energy to participate in the games.
- **Promoting well-being and releasing tension:** These benefits were highlighted by family members, some of whom indicated that the ability to move and scream during the games allowed their child to release tension.

- **Fostering a space for communication and interaction:** Thanks to the different stimuli and open environment offered by the actors, autistic participants were able to interact and communicate remotely with people who are not in their immediate surroundings.
- **A place to make friends:** Several participants identified the actors as “*friends*.” During the performances, some of them showed that they wish to become closer to the cast—they showed affection, asked questions to get to know them better, and/or greeted them in English after recognising many of them as foreigners.
- **Acknowledging autistic people and building their self-esteem:** Families and observers indicated that autistic people must usually deal with distance and rejection. The performance provided a loving gaze that made them feel welcomed, accepted, and respected, in addition to placing them at the center of the play. Observers mentioned the way participants were treated, such as when the actors congratulated them after a game: “*You did so well!*” Or when actors greeted participants or said goodbye by singing their name—which increased their self-esteem.
- **Stimuli and deployment of cognitive, emotional, and motor skills:** During the performances it was observed that this is a space in which autistic people deploy different abilities, such as their intelligence and memory to quickly understand the dynamics of the game, remember them, and even anticipate what they will be asked to do or say.

- **Proximity to the theatre:** Some autistic participants acknowledged that the performances were useful to “learn to act”. One of the participants, who had never acted before, learned from the project that he enjoys making silly faces and speaking in different voices, which was an experience that brought him close to his dream of being a comedy actor.
- **Artistic expression within the community:** Observers indicated that theatre games create a space for autistic people to express themselves, perform, and share it with the community. During the performances, some participants revealed their artistic talents.
- **Access to artistic spaces and inclusion for this population:** The project was seen as being able to create an artistic space dedicated to autistic people, in which they were the protagonists and where activities were designed based on their characteristics.

In turn, observers from civil society organisations added that the project helps to give visibility to autistic people and raise awareness about inclusion in society.



FOR THEIR FAMILIES

- **Positive experience:** Families were happy and thankful when they saw their children participating in the theatre games. The experience had a positive impact on parents because it allowed them to see their situation from a new perspective, to turn around the difficulties they face having an autistic child – especially in the context of all the stressors brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Tools for families to build skills:** Some mothers mentioned that the theatre games have given them tools to hold the attention of their children and allowed them to emphasise certain learning capabilities.
- **Inclusion:** Parents of the autistic participants indicated that, after experiencing rejection from society, the project was an opportunity to meet other families, share experiences, and feel included themselves.





LESSONS LEARNED BY THE TWO THEATRE COMPANIES AND THE OBSERVERS

Members of Flute Theatre and Teatro La Plaza, as well as representatives of arts organisations and civil society highlighted several lessons learned during the Heartbeat Project

FROM FLUTE THEATRE

- 1. Better understanding of the method:**
Kelly Hunter mentioned that the process of facilitating the transfer of the method and creating a production of *The Tempest* allowed her to better understand her method and learn how to adapt it to the virtual world, thus consolidating her work.
- 2. Opportunity to reflect on their work and empower the UK cast:** This learning opportunity has empowered the cast, acknowledging that everyone can lead games and pass the method along to others.
- 3. Learning about Peruvian culture:** They highlighted the opportunity for getting to know the Peruvian actors and the participating families, their strength and courage to keep moving forward, and the trusting relationship that was created, all of which made them feel like a big family working together.

FROM TEATRO LA PLAZA

1. **Opportunity to meet autistic people:** The project allowed them to learn more about the world of autistic people and connect with them from a loving perspective of being in the here and now.
2. **Decision-making process:** They commented on how practical Kelly Hunter was in their decision-making process, while always being focused on the autistic participants and their needs; being flexible to changes and learning how to problem-solve.
3. **A new theatre perspective:** The project was associated with going back to the basics of theatre, which imply gathering people and having an active spectator, allowing more proximity and familiarity with the audience to tailor the performance to them.
4. **Inspiration and sense of purpose:** They felt inspired to make theatre with a greater social impact, thus growing closer to people who usually do not have access to theatre performances.

FROM OBSERVERS FROM ARTS ORGANISATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY (RELATED TO THE ARTS, EDUCATION, AND HEALTH)

- 1. Importance of playing theatre games:**
Learning to manage the participants' voices and bodies and focusing on the present, to take a plunge into making art without the fear of taking risks, according to the sensibility and expressiveness of each participant.
- 2. Actors' skills:** Observers acknowledged the relevant skills in the actors' work, such as perseverance, teamwork, patience and empathy in connecting with the participants, offering love and care to promote their well-being, and accepting what each participant has to offer.
- 3. From an educational perspective:**
Observers highlighted how important it is to identify the stimuli that work better for each participant, so that they can be applied and improved continuously with the support of the family.
- 4. From a health perspective:** The observers pointed out that the artistic tools used in the play helped to move closer to and better connect with autistic people, and how inclusion can be promoted through different channels, including the arts, which is recognised as a tool for change that fosters communication and human development.



LOOKING AHEAD

Autistic people, their families, and the theatre companies expressed their interest in developing the work initiated by the Heartbeat Project. Autistic people want to continue to act, and their families want to continue to be able to count on a space that will allow their children to learn and enjoy themselves. Flute Theatre expressed their interest in continuing to work with Teatro La Plaza and expand the project throughout Latin America.

An especially relevant element for assessing future opportunities to transfer the process is the perspective that Hunter has brought to the Heartbeat Project. She believes that there is now a clear dissemination model for both theatre companies to take this work forward.

As for the informers, they listed several spaces that they believe could benefit from the *Hunter Heartbeat Method*:

- **Educational Spaces:** At elementary schools, high schools, and universities. More specifically, at Basic Special Education Centers (CEBE — *Centros Educativos Básicos Especiales*), Services to Support and Advise on Special Education Needs (SAANE — *Servicio de Apoyo y Asesoramiento para la Atención a las Necesidades Educativas Especiales*) with the Ministry of Education in Peru, as well as universities, especially when training professionals in psychology, education, and the arts.
- **Artistic Spaces:** At arts organisations and theatre groups in Peru and Latin America, as well as the Arts at School Program (PASE — *Programa de Artes en la Escuela*) directed at educators interested in artistic tools, as well as the *Conecta* Program, which is directed at artists—both of whom are managed by the Ministry of Culture in Peru.
- **Health-Related Spaces:** At community mobilisation and participation services at community health centres, which have started to work with the Cultural Points Programs (*Programa Puntos de Cultura*) managed by the Ministry of Culture in Peru, as well as other private health institutions.
- **Civil Society:** In parents associations and organisations (e.g., Cerrito Azul, Puno Corazón Azul) that work with people with ASD.

Respondents highlighted that the viability of future knowledge transfers and further use of the methodologies do not require a complete play to be implemented. As Hunter said, the Heartbeat Method can be used with only a few games because it is a flexible tool that can be adapted to different contexts and situations, and thus be used by people who are not actors.

OBSTACLES TO PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM

Respondents identified potential challenges and obstacles to implementing the method on a larger scale, but also offered suggestions for how to make implementation on a general level, and in their respective work areas, more feasible.

- **Seeking support from the State:** Family members believe that getting support from the state is key to implementing it on a larger scale.
- **Lack of knowledge about autism:** Decision-makers are not always knowledgeable about autism, so it takes time, effort, and the power of persuasion to raise awareness about the importance of working with this population.
- **Lack of spaces:** There is a perceived notion that Peru lacks venues for the arts, including theatres that could work with people with special needs.
- **A need for scientific evidence:** Often “scientific evidence” is requested to support the efficacy of the method. Observers from public organisations believe that more evidence is needed to support the implementation of the method on a larger scale within the public sector.
- **Lack of Human Resources:** It will take many actors to reach a significant number of autistic people.

- **Non-actors using the method:** Some informers identified the fact that creating a play requires acting skills and knowledge as a potential challenge, and that people without experience in the theatre may have difficulties expressing themselves.
- **Limited access to the internet, technology, and a venue:** Some families do not have access to the internet, a mobile device and/ or an adequate place from which they could take part in the project.
- **Funding:** Financial resources are required to cover production costs and pay for the actors. Some observers from arts organisations mentioned that the current format may not be financially viable.
- **Ability to meet the demand:** Observers from the health sector indicated it would be a potential risk to offer such an attractive service if there are limited human resources available, thus ultimately not meeting a high demand and becoming inaccessible to those who need it the most.

In addition to identifying challenges and obstacles, observers also proposed different strategies to facilitate the knowledge transfer and the implementation of the method on a larger scale:

- **Raising awareness of work** with the autistic population among decision makers.
- **Raising awareness of the role** that the arts play in human development and health.
- **Conducting studies** about the situation of autistic people in Peru.
- **Coordinating the work to disseminate and implement the method** through a network of organisations and institutions. These networks could also use the method, learn about it, and exchange experiences about different uses and benefits.
- **Optimising the use of human resources**, thus adapting the play so that it can be facilitated by fewer people or include more autistic people at each performance. The latter is suggested relative to severity level, thus offering group sessions to autistic people with lower severity and individual sessions for those who have severe autism.
- **Cutting down the length of the play** to promote more sessions with more autistic people.
- **Offering an in-person version** to mitigate the technology gap.
- Representatives from arts organisations suggested that there should be a **focus on training actors in the method** because they are able to understand it more quickly.
- **Culturally adapting the play to the target audience** (i.e., making the story, costume, and set more appropriate to each context).

Additionally, observers from public institutions and organisations mentioned specific actions that could be taken in their areas of work to implement the method.

Education Sector	Creating a training plan and a manual for educators and psychologists. Creating a pilot for the method. Decentralising the activity by coordinating the work through the arts and culture offices within the Ministry of Education in Peru, as well as through other institutions.
Health Sector	Designating a specific group to work on these activities at health centres. Coordinating the work with institutions that are current collaborators, such as the Culture Points (<i>Puntos de Cultura</i>) and the Ministry of Culture in Peru.
Cultural Sector	Focusing on people with special needs as part of the Arts at School Program (<i>PASE — Programa de Artes en la Escuela</i>) and listing the method as a tool in the PASE work guide. Communicating with the Arts Department at the Ministry of Culture in Peru to have the proposal evaluated.
Family Members of Autistic People	Creating a network to support the project and disseminate it throughout different spaces to introduce information to the public. Seeking sponsorship among institutions and companies at local, regional, national, and international levels. Applying for public financing. Training organisations in different regions so that they can replicate the method within their contexts. Adding autistic people to the team to make the process more inclusive.

CON CLU SIONS



The transfer process was successful in sharing techniques from a specialised British theatre company with one of Peru's leading artistic institutions. A new bilingual production of *The Tempest* is the concrete result of the transfer process. Music was considered a crucial element to contextualise the Peruvian version of *The Tempest*, as the sound design and the inclusion of regional instruments, rhythms, and singing on the part of the Peruvian actors made the co-creation process easier.

Both companies faced different challenges: Teatro La Plaza needed to incorporate a new artistic method into their work and Flute Theatre needed to address the use of Spanish in the performance. However, these challenges led the companies to assist one another and find ways to collaborate and provide mutual support throughout the process.

The Heartbeat Method makes it possible for autistic people to interact with each other in a comfortable, familiar space, so they can meet and experience a peaceful environment together. The play puts autistic people at the centre by making them the protagonists of each performance: they dictate the pace, and the play is adapted according to what participants can express during the show.

Each participant is unique and participates from their own environment, context, and physical and emotional space. Actors had to adapt themselves to these idiosyncrasies and create a safe, comfortable space where everyone could play and have fun, which was achieved with each one of the participants.

The Tempest can be acted or played by autistic people, which indicated that they could deploy their intelligence and memory as they understand the sequence of the games, remember them, and repeat them. The more sessions were organised with the participants, the more confident and engaged they were in the games.

Moreover, performing *The Tempest* has given participants an opportunity to break away from their routine and engage in a playful activity that was accessible to them and their families amid a pandemic and the resulting restrictions on movement. Additionally, it

allowed parents to participate and engage in a game with their children in a facilitated, supervised context.

The positive impacts that were reported and/or stated include: acknowledgement; inclusion; empowerment (both within participants' own family context and externally); enhanced social visibility. Both outside observers and family members were surprised, sometimes even amazed, by the abilities shown by participants during rehearsals and performances. After each performance of *The Tempest*, there were conversations among participants, family members, theatre companies, and observers, which yielded moving, eye-opening statements.

The project has provided an alternative and quick response to the new demands arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, thus providing a template for creative recovery for autistic individuals and their families in Peru. It has forged an international alliance of stakeholders, highlighting the key role that the arts can play in the lives of people with disabilities in the Global South and beyond. The project raised expectations for the future and helped to place the debate in the public arena, yet it also revealed that there are many challenges ahead in terms of the policy and further integration with other sectors that are needed.

We hope that the digital and real spaces for mutual collaboration and co-creation that were fostered within the scope of this arts-based research project continue to grow, develop, and flourish, adding to the ongoing struggle to build a fairer and more inclusive society for everyone.

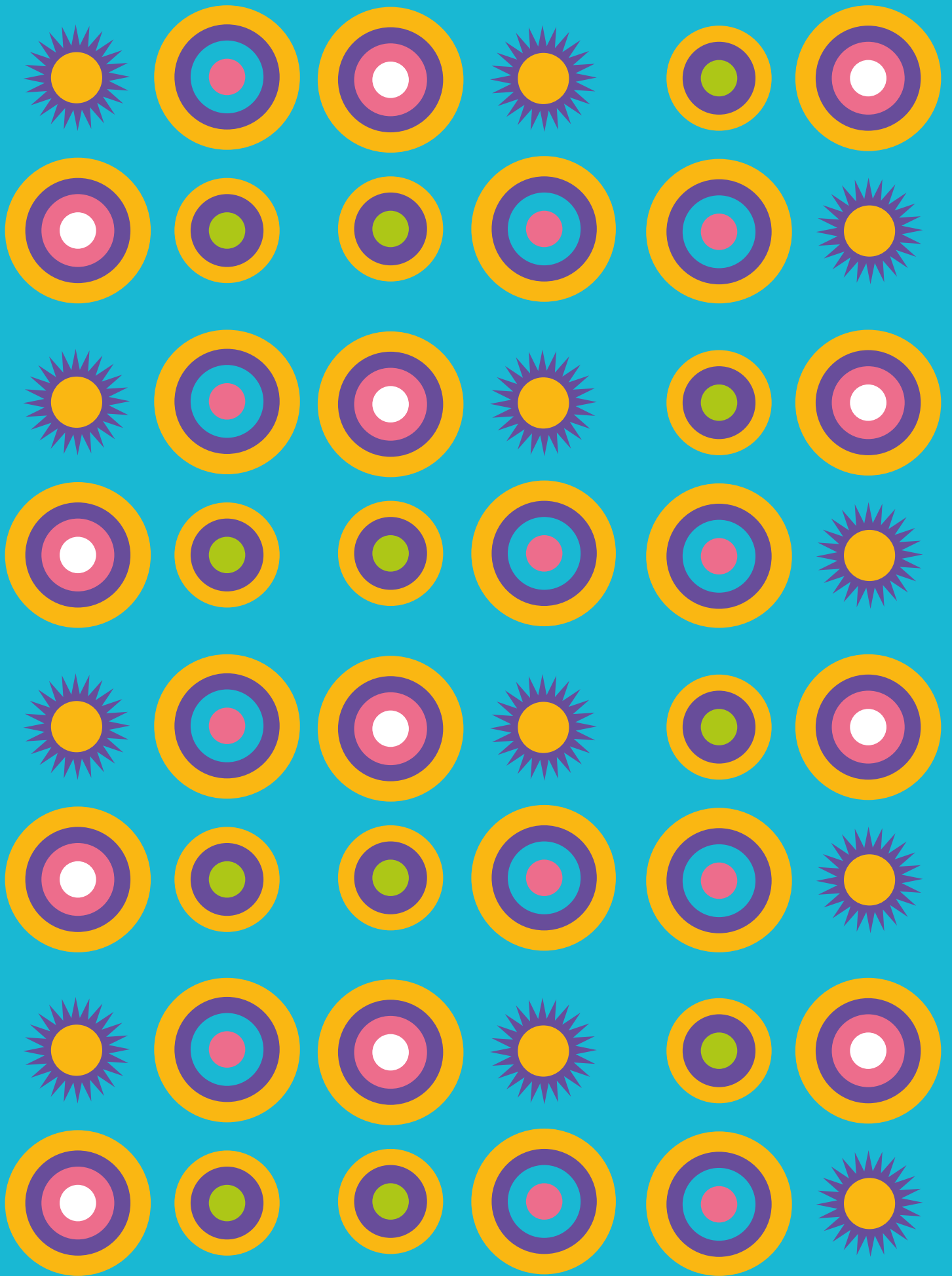
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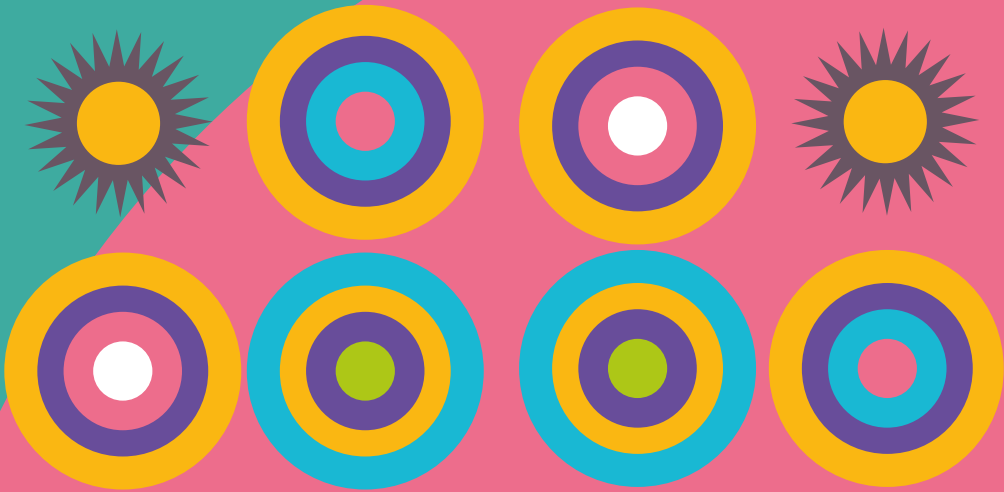
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