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Autism and Reduced Humanity in *All In A Row*

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Popular media representations of autism all too often flatten or erase the humanity of autistic individuals, presenting autism as a condition that is defined by absence. Through such narrativizing, autistic people are confined to a limited and limiting framework, one which defines an autistic life as being inherently lesser, tragic, or not worth living at all. This article will examine how this process of dehumanisation occurs, through an analysis of Southwark Playhouse's 2019 theatrical production *All In A Row*, a family drama featuring a grey faced puppet in the role of an autistic child with high support needs. Placing this depiction of autism alongside other media portrayals of families with autistic children, as well as historic medical literature about the condition, I expose how the literal dehumanisation of the production's autistic character is reflective of the rhetorical dehumanisation of autistic individuals and the denial of autistic subjectivity that has been created by historic medical discourse and mainstream media narratives.

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# Autism and Reduced Humanity in *All In A Row*

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Jack Elliott McIntosh

## Introduction

To be autistic is to have the basic fact of one's humanity repeatedly and violently called into question. Autism researcher Remi Yergeau asserts that autism 'represents the edges and boundaries of humanity, a queerly crip kind of isolationism', a statement that is reflected in Southwark Playhouse's 2019 production, *All In A Row*.<sup>1</sup> Written by Alex Oates, the narrative follows parents Martin and Tamora the night before their son Laurence, who is autistic, non-speaking, and with high support needs, is due to be sent to a residential facility, following an investigation conducted by social services into bruises discovered on him. The production made the decision to cast a puppet in the role of Laurence, which caused much controversy at the time, with the play being simultaneously praised for its 'warmth and truth' in its portrayal of a family caring for an autistic child with high support needs, and lambasted for the use of a non-human object in the role of an autistic child.<sup>2</sup> This production raised questions about representation and the 'right to tell stories', inspiring articles on the subject of what it means to have a disabled character played by a non-human object, as well as whose knowledge about autism grants them authority over the telling of autistic stories.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this article does touch on these issues, I focus my critique on the ways this contemporary representation of autism is the culmination of over 50 years of medical literature and media coverage that has directly contributed to the dehumanisation of autistic people.

Placing this production alongside past representations and historic medical research, I expose how a repetitive, singular and, most importantly, fictional image of autism persists in the public imagination, creating a spectacle of the condition and transforming autistic individuals from living, breathing human beings into monstrous

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<sup>1</sup> M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism, On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2018), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Alisa Opar, 'Is autism a medical condition or just a difference? The question roils autistic community', Washington Post, (2019), <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/a-medical-condition-or-just-a-difference-the-question-roils-autism-community/2019/05/03/87e26f7e-6845-11e9-8985-4cf30147bdca\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/a-medical-condition-or-just-a-difference-the-question-roils-autism-community/2019/05/03/87e26f7e-6845-11e9-8985-4cf30147bdca_story.html)> [Accessed 21 April 2024]; Shaun May, 'All In A Row Review', *Shaun May*, (2019) <<https://shaunmay.co.uk/allinarow/>> [Accessed 22 April 2024].

<sup>3</sup> James Ward-Sinclair, 'All In A Row: Review', *Autistic and Unapologetic*, (2019), <<https://autisticandunapologetic.com/2019/03/03/all-in-a-row-review/>> [Accessed 21 April 2024]; Bree Hadley, Morgan Batch and Michael Whelan, 'The entitled ally: authorship, consultation, and the 'right' to stage autistic people's stories', *Disability & Society*, 36:9 (2021), 1489-1590.

myths. Through my examination, I illuminate how the depiction of autism in *All In A Row* is reflective of the myriad ways the humanity of autistic individuals is rendered non-existent, with autism being framed as an imminent threat that must be quashed, lest it go on to infect more children. I also reveal how control over dominant narratives of autism is maintained by the non-autistic majority, whose fictional creations have come to overshadow the experiences of real autistic people. I focus the final section on the impact this framing of the lives of autistic people has on the treatment of autistic individuals within society, explaining how it justifies various abusive practices committed against autistic people for the purposes of treatment, with the underlying message that the world would be a better place were autistic people to disappear.

## **Autism – The Myths and the Monsters**

Alex Oates, the writer of *All In A Row*, justifies his right to tell a story about a family with an autistic child by highlighting his proximity to autistic people through his decade of work as a carer for autistic and other disabled children.<sup>4</sup> This experience, he argues, grants him the necessary 'lived experience' to tell an authentic story, exemplifying the feeling of many that, as articulated by Bree Hadley, their experiences with disabled people gives them 'special insight into disabled people's ontology, epistemology, perspectives, and views – and, in Oates' case, disabled peoples' parents' views'.<sup>5</sup> This becomes an issue when it is assumed that the insight and perspective of autistic people themselves is deemed unnecessary when it comes to producing knowledge about the condition, whether that be within a medical establishment, or during the creation of an autistic character. Whilst Oates claims that autistic people were consulted, with 'two autistic members of the team directly responsible for the characterisation of Laurence', no individual autistic person has come forward to confirm this, placing autistic people to the periphery of a story that will impact how they are viewed by the public.<sup>6</sup> The story Oates is telling about himself is also a story about how the public view of autistic people is constructed primarily by the non-autistic majority, with autistic people's own lived experiences, perspective, and labour being entirely obfuscated.

The construction of autistic subjectivity from an outsider perspective has created a fictional version of the condition that has embedded itself into the public consciousness,

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<sup>4</sup> Bree Hadley, 'Allyship in disability arts: roles, relationships, and practices', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 25:2 (2020), p.182.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Oates, *All In A Row*, (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), Preface.

propagating gross misunderstandings about autistic people. Having a puppet in the role of a non-speaking autistic child creates a kind of monstrous spectacle of autism that both mythologises the condition and dehumanises autistic individuals by positioning them as existing outside of the realms of humanity, inspiring in the spectator feelings of intrigue, but also repulsion.<sup>7</sup> With skin the colour of concrete, mop-like orange hair, a vacant expression, and no legs, being conspicuously manipulated around the stage, Laurence's appearance, his inhuman skin colour and expressionless face, creates distance between himself and the spectator. One of the central issues of the design of the puppet, reviewer Emma Robdale notes, is that he 'hasn't been created to be life-like,' which means that 'the feelings and emotions of Laurence cannot be fully conveyed'.<sup>8</sup> The production's sole autistic character being portrayed by an inanimate object reinforces historical arguments that autistic individuals, whilst appearing human, are missing a crucial element that would grant them full humanity, such as, a comment made by psychologist Ole Ivar Lovaas about his work with autistic children, in which he describes these children as not being people 'in the psychological sense'.<sup>9</sup> Had the creative team gone with a design that would allow for a more expressive puppet, this might not have been as much of an issue, however, Laurence's design, rather than allowing for his presence to be naturalised over time, causes him to remain an eerie, alien figure, whose embodiment suggests the mere facsimile of humanity.

The various descriptors of Laurence throughout the narrative, paint his very existence as being defined by absence, reducing autism down to, as Yergeau articulates, 'a series of involuntaries – of thought, mode, action, and being [...] involuntarity dominates much of the discourse of autism, underlying clinical understandings of affect, intention, and socially appropriate response'.<sup>10</sup> At no point is the audience granted a window into Laurence's internal life, his emotions and experience of the world, he is only ever viewed from an outside perspective, his being constructed by the descriptors provided by the adults around him. His mother describes him as a 'member of the congregation of Pixar and Disney, he is a fully paid up member of the arranging objects in a straight line society', while his father laments his son's repeated rewatching of Disney movies.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner, 'The Pathos of "Mindblindness": Autism, Science, and Sadness in "Theory of Mind" Narratives', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 5:2 (2011), p.202.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Robdale, 'All In a Row' is out of line: disability representation done wrong', *Disability Arts Online*, (2019), <<https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/all-in-a-row-is-out-of-line-disability-representation-done-wrong/>> [Accessed 21 April 2024].

<sup>9</sup> Paul Chance, "'After you hit a child, you can't just get up and leave him; you are hooked to that kid" A conversation with Ivar Lovaas about self-mutilating children and how their parents make it worse', *Psychology Today*, January (1974), p.76.

<sup>10</sup> M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism, On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2018), p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Oates, p.26; Oates, p.9.

Such actions, the lining up of items and rewatching of films, are interpreted as being entirely purposeless, as representing what Julia Miele Rodas calls symbolic absence, the meaningless actions of a hollow automaton.<sup>12</sup> During a conversation between Martin, Tamora, and Laurence's paid carer, Gary, Gary explains his theory that 'people with special needs are animals wrongly reincarnated in human form'.<sup>13</sup> This theory, put forward by an individual assumed to be the most knowledgeable on the subject of autism out of all the characters, creates the suggestion that Laurence is so pathologically underdeveloped that his consciousness is more akin to that of an animal, his very existence the result of a cosmic mistake.

Laurence's embodiment coupled with the descriptors of him by the other characters replicates historic medical literature and cultural representations that relegate autistic subjectivity to the very edges of humanity. The descriptors of Laurence are reminiscent of ones analysed by John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner, such as early autism researcher Leo Kanner's description of an autistic child's echolalic speech as 'parrot like'.<sup>14</sup> Duffy and Dorner showcase the ways narratives about autism devalue atypical ways of being and dehumanise autistic subjects: 'the autism narrative is not merely a story; it is an expression of values and a means to persuade its audience to accede to a particular rational, emotional, and moral view of cognitive and behavioural possibilities'.<sup>15</sup> Those who are placed in charge of constructing images of autism, particularly within fictional narratives, are producing the measuring stick that real-life autistic people are judged against, with individuals not only needing to match specific criteria in order to receive a formal diagnosis, but also needing to fit into the narrow view of autism that has been presented in media in order to be visible to the general public. From Raymond Babbitt to Dr. Shaun Murphy and, most famously in the United Kingdom, Christopher Boone, these imagined figures of autism have come to overshadow living autistic individuals, reducing the possibilities of what autism can be, what it can look like, and restricting which autistic people are visible within the general population, and which remain in the shadows.

From this outsider perspective, autism not only gains its mythical qualities, with a good story consistently getting in the way of the truth, it also becomes a moral issue to be dealt with. The condition is frequently positioned as a threat to an individual, a kind of parasitic disease that infects a child's mind to the point where they become almost

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Miele Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe*, (Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.16.

<sup>13</sup> Oates, p.38.

<sup>14</sup> Duffy and Dorner, p.203.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.204.

unrecognisable to those closest to them. Choosing to depict an autistic child through a static object is not a neutral act, when coupled with the ways he is discussed by the adults around him, a clear moral judgement has been made. The image of a puppet in a human family makes it appear as though Martin and Tamora's human, non-autistic child has been replaced with the monstrous autistic creature of Laurence. Much of the discourse of autism is focused on the figure of the child, signalling anxieties around what Bill Rocque, in his analysis of the writings of Claudia Castaneda on the subject of the child, articulates as anxieties around potential threats to a child's 'normal' trajectory of development: 'it is routinely put forward by the human sciences as they attempt to normalize autistic and other "deviant" bodies'.<sup>16</sup> Laurence's outward appearance is a physical manifestation of his internal disorder. Rather than experiencing a different development from those of his peers, his autism tragically prevents him from ever developing into the desired independently functioning adult. He will forever remain a half-formed entity unable to have any decent quality of life.

This positioning of autistic subjectivity as being defined by absence or replacement is part of a pattern of representation that has done irreparable damage to the view of autistic individuals within Western society. An egregious example comes from the 2003 television film *Hear the Silence*, in which Juliet Stevenson portrays mother Christine Shields, who falsely believes her four-year-old son Nikki has developed autism after receiving the MMR vaccine. Examining photographs of Nikki at various stages of development, Shields comments that, prior to receiving the vaccine, her son looked 'normal', whereas six months later, he appears 'dead eyed', signalling the moment autism 'took over' her son. In 2021, during an interview with the musician Sia about her film *Music*, which featured an autistic teenage character with needs similar to Laurence, the character was described as essentially a mop or wig.<sup>17</sup> This repeated aligning of autistic people with inanimate objects calls into question the basic humanity of non-speaking autistic people, exemplifying the assumption that, according to Amy Sequenzia, an autistic advocate who communicates using an Augmentative and Alternative Communication device, 'a nonspeaking autistic cannot self-advocate; that the so-called "low functioning" cannot think by themselves

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Rocque, 'Science Fictions: Figuring Autism as Threat and Mystery in Medico-Therapeutic Literature', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30:1, (2010), <<https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/1064/1231>> [Accessed 9 January 2024].

<sup>17</sup> Alfie Heartwell, *Hear the Silence (2003) - Best Video and Audio Combined*, online video recording, Youtube, 25 March 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IXZAgEXRtY>> [Accessed 10 January 2024]; Jessie Gender, *Sia's Music, The Trap of Symbolic Autistic Representation*, online video recording, Youtube, 26 February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=138y6mtgl8>>, [Accessed 12 January 2024].

and cannot have ideas or opinions'.<sup>18</sup> Rather than expanding the concept of humanity to include those who do not fit the rigid criteria, those deemed non-persons, in this case, autistic individuals with high support needs, have involuntarily forcibly imposed upon them, 'often to violent effect'.<sup>19</sup>

## On Suffering

One of the central issues when it comes to who holds the most power in discourses of autism is the issue of suffering: whose suffering is visible, and who is only seen to cause suffering? Writing about families with autistic children, Suzanne Wright, co-founder of the American organisation *Autism Speaks*, describes these families as merely 'existing. Breathing – yes. Eating – yes. Sleeping – maybe. Working – most definitely – 24/7. [...] Life is lived moment-to-moment. In anticipation of the child's next move. In despair. In fear of the future'.<sup>20</sup> Wright's evocative description of families with autistic children paints a familiar picture of the autistic child, one that frames them as a burden on their family, with autism itself being positioned as a tragedy. Wright's descriptor of family life with an autistic child is reminiscent of a 2009 *Autism Speaks* advertisement, titled 'I Am Autism', which depicts autistic children as tragic burdens on their families, using statements such as, 'if you're happily married, I will make sure that your marriage fails [...] I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain. I don't sleep, so I make sure you don't either', claiming that autism works 'faster than pediatric aids, cancer, and diabetes combined'.<sup>21</sup> What these various depictions of life with an autistic child signify is the overriding opinion that a life with autism is one that is steeped in misery, with no possibility of even a moment of happiness. The insidious conclusion that can be drawn from this is that autism, and autistic people by proxy, must be eradicated entirely.

The framing of the autistic child as the cause of a family's suffering is on full display in the narrative of *All In A Row*. Laurence is positioned as a destructive entity whose presence in the home has put a strain on his parent's relationship. He is presented as being constantly on the edge of a violent meltdown, with little explanation of what these

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<sup>18</sup> Amy Sequenzia, 'Loud Hands: I Speak Up With My Fingers', in Julia Bascom, ed., *Loud Hands, Autistic People, Speaking*, (Washington DC: The Autistic Press, 2012), 346–351, (p.346).

<sup>19</sup> Yergeau, p.9.

<sup>20</sup> Emily Willingham, 'Who Are The People In Your Neighborhood, Sesame Street?', *Forbes*, 9 April 2014, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2014/04/09/who-are-the-autistic-people-in-your-neighborhood-sesame-street/?sh=4a999f5e52f5>> [Accessed 5 January 2024].

<sup>21</sup> ASAN, 'Horrific Autism Speaks "I am Autism" ad transcript;', ASAN, (2009) <<https://autisticadvocacy.org/2009/09/horrific-autism-speaks-i-am-autism-ad-transcript/>> [Accessed 9 January 2024].

behaviours that challenge communicate, with his own father describing him as turning into 'a pitbull when he doesn't get an extra pizza'.<sup>22</sup> Contrasting this fictional representation of a child who experiences violent meltdowns, parents of autistic children, in a roundtable discussion published by *Disability Studies Quarterly*, spoke about the difficulties of raising an autistic child with high support needs. In their discussion they highlighted the struggle to access necessary services, the fear that one day their child may hurt themselves or someone else, but also, the deep love they feel for their children, and how upsetting it is to see them in states of distress.<sup>23</sup> When it comes to *All In A Row*, the production takes a significantly less nuanced approach, with Laurence's parents expressing minimal concern for his wellbeing, seeming more concerned with the effect these episodes have on them, rather than what the frequency of these meltdowns might mean for Laurence's mental or emotional state.

By claiming that the suffering that is endured by the caretakers of autistic children is solely due to the child's mere presence within the home, the suffering of the autistic individual is either minimised or outright denied. In a monologue given at the start of the production, Laurence's father Martin describes an incident in which he placed his child in a prone restraint, openly describing it as 'the kind of restraint they call child abuse', with the bruises Laurence has sustained as a result of being put in multiple restraints being dismissed as 'nothing compared to the bite marks you have on your arm'.<sup>24</sup> The use of restraint within the production also appears in the 2021 film *Music*, which features a scene in which autistic child Music is physically restrained by an adult during a meltdown, which said adult describes as 'crushing her with my love'.<sup>25</sup> Responding to an extract from Whitney Ellenby's memoir about being the parent of an autistic child, in which she describes an incident where she responded to her child experiencing sensory overload by 'fighting off his fists, pinning him down, and inching [...] toward the auditorium's entrance', an effort, she claims, "'to save him from a life entrapped by autistic phobias'", Aaden Friday notes the impact of abusive practices committed against autistic children

<sup>22</sup> Oates, p.11.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph James Savarese, Pamela Block, Kristina Chew et al, 'Parent & Sibling Roundtable: Neurodiversity and Caregiving', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30:1 (2010), <<https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/1061/1236>> [Accessed 13 January 2024].

<sup>24</sup> Oates, p.7; Oates, p.25.

<sup>25</sup> *Music*, dir. by Sia, (Signature Entertainment, 2021), online video recording, Amazon Prime, <[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Music-Kate-Hudson/dp/B08VRGJRJW/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=2H39PZYSWQP7D&dib=eyJ2ljojMSJ9.vNFSKAXN4hNfK6-AoCzC0IMjppjOJW-W0wx42hIfRONSRe4Gub2rnoiRI0XHqgBAzpkU3haZKOZxqia-Xm79zZQu5a\\_OkQhbui4hXZOeJscaiQnjtLzJGu6xPbvskel1erHYg1PUjFwtVeBdjdRb3lw.ARxwfezBhulqMy4XXRI-WC90mno8FIOQBffmQ7jSrhk&dib\\_tag=se&keywords=music+film&qid=1705156594&prefix=music+film%2Caps%2C294&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Music-Kate-Hudson/dp/B08VRGJRJW/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2H39PZYSWQP7D&dib=eyJ2ljojMSJ9.vNFSKAXN4hNfK6-AoCzC0IMjppjOJW-W0wx42hIfRONSRe4Gub2rnoiRI0XHqgBAzpkU3haZKOZxqia-Xm79zZQu5a_OkQhbui4hXZOeJscaiQnjtLzJGu6xPbvskel1erHYg1PUjFwtVeBdjdRb3lw.ARxwfezBhulqMy4XXRI-WC90mno8FIOQBffmQ7jSrhk&dib_tag=se&keywords=music+film&qid=1705156594&prefix=music+film%2Caps%2C294&sr=8-1)> [Accessed 11 January 2024].



being framed as acts of love, stating that such practices ‘reject basic, peer-reviewed medical science, or with parents who demonstrate a complete and utter disregard for their autistic children’s autonomy [...] it is not love; it is abuse’.<sup>26</sup>

Comparing the experiences of Ellenby’s son with their own, Friday writes of the trauma inflicted on them at the hands of their mother, who interpreted the ways Friday engaged with the world as ‘different from other children, and deemed that difference the enemy’.<sup>27</sup> Autistic activist Julia Bascom, recounting her experiences at school, recalls having her hands held down ‘in textures that hurt worse than my broken wrist while I cried and begged and pleaded and screamed’.<sup>28</sup> Naomi Klein, whose son is autistic, has written about online encounters with parents of autistic children who define themselves as being at war with their child’s autism, leading them to seek out highly dangerous treatments that include ‘getting their kids to drink chlorine dioxide, a bleach commonly used in pulp and paper mills’.<sup>29</sup> The writings of autistic individuals not only dispel the myth of autistic people as lacking inner consciousness and emotionality, but also make the case for the discontinuation of harmful practices that are being pushed under the guise of treatment. As an autistic child who is unable to communicate using spoken language, Laurence, who is entirely reliant on the adults around him, is highly vulnerable to abuse, however, the positioning of both him and the autistic children he represents as unfeeling creatures erases this fact.

The ultimate message of the production, whether or not this was the intention of the creative team, is that the ‘problem’ of Laurence can only be solved with his removal from the home, an idea that puts forward the desire, as described by Mark Osteen in his chapter on the ‘rules’ popular narratives of autism adhere to, ‘that autism and autistic people vanish completely’.<sup>30</sup> In a rare expression of care towards the narrative’s conclusion, with Martin and Tamora looking after Laurence following a meltdown, Martin says to Tamora, ‘You can love someone and wonder what it would be like if they were someone else. That’s OK’.<sup>31</sup> Autistic advocate Jim Sinclair, in his 1993 article ‘Don’t Mourn For Us’, writes of autism as a way of being in the world that cannot be separated from

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<sup>26</sup> Aaden Friday, ‘When You’re Autistic, Abuse Is Considered Love’, *Medium*, (2018), <<https://medium.com/the-establishment/when-youre-autistic-abuse-is-considered-love-84eea4011844>> [Accessed 12 January 2024].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Julia Bascom, ‘Quiet Hands’, *Just Stimming* (2011) <<https://juststimming.wordpress.com/2011/10/05/quiet-hands/>> [Accessed 12 January 2024].

<sup>29</sup> Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger, A Trip Into The Mirror World*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2023), p.193.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Osteen, ‘Narrating Autism’, in Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini, eds., *Worlds of Autism, Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 261–284, (p.263).

<sup>31</sup> Oates, p.54.

the individual, stating that, when parents wish their child did not have autism, they are really wishing for a child different from the one they have, that their greatest wish is that their autistic child will cease to exist, 'and strangers you can love will move in behind our faces'.<sup>32</sup> Whilst parents should have a space to voice and work through the feelings they may have upon learning their child is autistic, to speak of the wish to have a non-autistic child in front of their real child is incredibly damaging, implying that what is spoken in front of an autistic child does not matter, as they either cannot comprehend what is being said about them, or will not have an emotional response.

The devaluing of autistic life can lead to a skewed view of autistic death. Speaking directly to the political nature of disabled death and grief, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha recalls reaching the heartbreaking realisation that, when it comes to the deaths of disabled individuals, 'the world doesn't have a language or a framework to understand the tragedy of their deaths'.<sup>33</sup> When autistic life is defined by suffering and decreed lesser, autistic death might not be mourned, and might even be considered an act of mercy. This kind of thinking is expressed in the comments made by a woman who murdered her autistic daughter, seventeen-year-old Casey Albury, in New Zealand in 1997: 'I know I did the very best I could do for Casey. But what a waste'.<sup>34</sup> Whose deaths are deemed significant, who are remembered and publicly mourned, is an urgent issue to be attended to at this time, especially when considering the fact that autistic individuals are at increased risk of dying by suicide.<sup>35</sup> The persistent framing of autism as a destructive force that destroys the life of the autistic individual and those around them, coupled with the fear of the condition that can, for instance, cause parents to deny their children lifesaving vaccines, or force their child into potentially life threatening situations in the search for a cure, exemplifies the phrase 'better off dead than disabled'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jim Sinclair, 'Don't Mourn for Us', *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies*, Vol 1:1 (2012), p.1.

<sup>33</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled, Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), p.116.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Matthews, 'Tragic end to life of beauty and misery', *The New Zealand Herald*, (2003), <<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/tragic-end-to-life-of-beauty-and-misery/EYDFQBXTN2BKUD44UIEKY/>> [Accessed 20 April 2024].

<sup>35</sup> National Autistic Society, *Suicide*, (n.d), <<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/suicide/#How%20common%20is%20suicide%20for%20autistic%20people?>> [Accessed 16 January 2024].

<sup>36</sup> Brisa Mendez, 'Better Dead than Disabled: Analysis of Me Before You', *Access\*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*, 3:1, (2019), <[https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol3/iss1/3/?utm\\_source=digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu%2Faccess%2Fvol3%2Fiss1%2F3&utm\\_medium=PDF&utm\\_campaign=PDFCoverPages](https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol3/iss1/3/?utm_source=digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu%2Faccess%2Fvol3%2Fiss1%2F3&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages)> [Accessed 13 January 2024].

## Conclusion

In writing *All In A Row*, Oates claims that he wanted to 'look at the way some neurodivergent children are treated by the system and society', however, the narrative falls into a pattern of writings about the condition that have come out of the systems Oates claims to want to observe.<sup>37</sup> Whilst the production is deserving of criticism all on its own, its existence has not occurred in a vacuum, but instead represents decades of dehumanising rhetoric created and maintained by the neurotypical majority, some of whom also directly profit from the suffering of autistic people. In *All In A Row*, the audience is not only invited to view a spectacle of suffering and a monstrous other, but they are also imbued with feelings of fear and disgust at the sight of the performance's most vulnerable character. Narratives like *All In A Row* trap autistic people in a violent cycle of dehumanisation and silencing, with the stories being told about them defining their lives solely in terms of tragedy, whilst being unable to contribute to knowledge being produced about them. *All In A Row* highlights the issue of the commodification of trauma, specifically, the ways members of majority groups profit from the suffering of marginalised individuals, as well as the public fascination with autistic narratives that are marked by trauma and tragedy. This production creates a narrative that centres around the pain and suffering of a fictional family, dehumanising its autistic subject and positioning him as a burden standing in the way of his parent's happiness, implying that there can be no moment of levity or joy in a house with an autistic child. This framing makes the following message abundantly clear: if you are autistic, it does not matter what happens to you, because you are not a person.

'The history of disabled people in the Western world', Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, 'is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while being politically and socially erased'.<sup>38</sup> The depiction of an autistic child using a puppet, coupled with the response to the criticism levied against the performance by autistic people themselves, serves as an apt representation of this phenomenon, of being hyper-visible whilst having one's experiences, labour and suffering erased. The announcement that a puppet would be performing the role of Laurence was met with backlash from many autistic people, creating a movement on the social media platform X, using the hashtag 'PuppetGate'. X users spoke of their distress at seeing themselves represented by a grey faced puppet: 'it's a disturbing reminder of how media portrays us and how "carers" really see the people they're supposedly caring for', with others detailing their

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<sup>37</sup> Oates, preface, para 1.

<sup>38</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Staring at the Other', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 25:4, (2005), <<https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/610/787>> [Accessed 4 April 2024].

experiences growing up in a similar environment to Laurence: 'I have C-PTSD from that shit and I wasn't even getting the worst of it because I was undiagnosed'.<sup>39</sup> In response to these criticisms, Southwark Playhouse released a statement of support for the production, stating that they were aware that 'some may have made their minds up about the piece already', encouraging people to see the play and have a constructive conversation about its contents.<sup>40</sup> Staging a fictional narrative of autism whilst simultaneously discounting the criticisms of autistic people exemplifies Garland-Thomson's point, autistic people remain hyper visible whilst simultaneously having their voices silenced.

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<sup>39</sup> Tired Autistic (@autisticmisabel, 9 February 2019), 'I only just stumbled upon the #puppetgate now and I don't have much to add that hasn't already been expressed, but I'll just say this is a disturbing reminder of how media portrays us and how "carers" really see the people they supposedly care for. It's horrendous' (tweet) <<https://twitter.com/autisticmisabel/status/1094209369909145601>> [Accessed 18 April 2024]; María/Seph Nuñez (she/they) (@VdeoDmeMariSeph, 28 February 2019), 'So I just learned about #puppetgate and holy shit, reading about this play makes me feel physically ill because that is the EXACT type of environment my brother and I were raised in. I have C-PTSD from that shit and I wasn't even getting the worst of it because I was undiagnosed' (tweet), <<https://twitter.com/VdeoDmeMariSeph/status/1100992509403123713>> [Accessed 18 April 2024].

<sup>40</sup> Southwark Playhouse (@swkplay, 12 February 2019), 'A statement from our Artistic Director about ALL IN A ROW' (tweet). <<https://twitter.com/swkplay/status/1095327427071496192>> [Accessed 13 January 2024].

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