Exhibition sparks conversation about autism

By Keith Reeves

An invitation to speak at an Arts For All Otago Network meeting about making the arts accessible to people with autism sparked an exhibition at the Otago Museum of artwork by 28 autistic artists.

Driving the project was Tanea Paterson, who shared the Arts For All Otago Network stage with Sheryl Davies of Altogether Autism.

"I knew we had the talent but at first, I thought it would be a small friends-and-whānau thing in a local hall," Tanea says. "I was blown away at the meeting when Rachel Cooper from Otago Museum said we could use the H D Skinner Annex for something on a much bigger scale than I had imagined."

An autistic woman and a qualified addiction consultant, Tanea says she is used to speaking and writing about autism and its challenges. "But I came to see that often I was only reaching other autistic people and their families, who already had a good understanding of autism. I needed to engage with the wider society and realised that using art as a platform to give our group a voice had the potential to
be superbly positive. I was also very aware of the size of the talent pool in our community."

And so Tanea and three others (Tom, Western and Denise) formed the group **iNDx – Autistic Arts and Culture Aotearoa**. Explaining the term “iNDx”, Tanea says the “i” stands for identity and “ND” for neurodivergent or neurologically “not typical”, while “Dx” is a play on the medical abbreviation for diagnosis.

“As opposed to the deficit/disorder view, we support the neurodiversity view as a more humane and inclusive way of looking at autism,” Tanea says.

![Tanea outside the iNDx exhibition](image)

The group then worked with Rachel and others from **Otago Museum**, and the exhibition began to take shape. “We threw ideas around and there was so much energy and excitement. When we realised we were going to be able to do it, there were tears: mostly mine,” Tanea says.

This was also when the group met its biggest challenge. “We didn’t know what to expect because we had never done anything like this before. Predictable things are much more pleasing to the autistic mind and so the difficulty was within ourselves. We had to trust the uncertain process and accept offers of help. We had to use our passion and excitement for the project to buffer the terror and anxiety of ‘what ifs’.”

Tanea praises the support the group received from Otago Museum. “Rachel and the team were always around to answer our questions and support us but totally respected our autistic-led kaupapa. That’s what made the exhibition possible.”

Every artist who submitted work had at least one work in the exhibition, which ran from 11 to 23 August. Along with local artists, there were artists from Auckland through to the Hawkes Bay, Wellington, Canterbury and Southland. One artists was from Canberra, Australia. [You can download the exhibition catalogue](#)

Tanea says the involvement of the museum professionals meant work was displayed with a skill that revealed its quality and drew in the audience.
Rachel Cooper, the Public Engagement Manager at Otago Museum, says it was a privilege working with the iNDx team

Adapting its thinking and planning processes

"Providing a platform for members of our community to express themselves and share information is really important to us," she says. "Developing the iNDx exhibition and its supporting programmes required us to adapt our thinking and planning processes so that the group felt comfortable working with us. The result was a collaborative and thought-provoking exhibition and we are so grateful that the artists trusted us to help tell their stories."

It was the audience's engagement with the works that gave Tanea the most satisfaction. "With autism, there tends to be a focus on the negative. The show opened up a view of autism that was not defined by medicine or the media. It offered different viewpoints, feelings and dynamics from inside the autism community, showing its wonderful diversity and complexity.

"That was why we left each artist's 'bio' just as they sent it in. We saw no need to edit them, to force them into a new shape. Being forced to 'fit in' is a very problematic issue for autistic members of society."

Open dialogue about autism

Workshops held over the weekends provided open dialogue about autism. For some visitors, it was their first encounter with autism and autistic people. It gave them the chance to ask questions and appreciate the uniqueness of autistic perspectives. Some spoke of feeling more confident to talk about autism in a positive way as a result of having seen the work on show.
Tanea says Otago Museum also gained a better understanding of autism and organised “quiet hours” in the main museum areas to increase access for visitors with acute sensory sensitivity to noise and lights.

“It wasn’t an exhibition to look at autistic people,” Tanea says. “It was about engaging with people and using amazing art as a wonderful catalyst for conversations about autism.”

Some of those conversations were between autistic people, who may have few opportunities to meet socially. “The autistic community tends to have very few social events because the communication, social and sensory differences we have can hinder our ability to socialise in typical ways.

“We need a theme or focus to bring us together and the exhibition gave us that. We were connected by being a part of this project and that gave the artists a great sense of self-belief, identity and pride.”

With this success behind them, iNDx wants to take the work further: for example, providing an autistic arts hub where people can connect, learn and feel the freedom of expressing their identity through the arts.

“Connection is an imperative part of wellbeing and everyone benefits when art is the focus for that,” Tanea says.

iNDx – Autistic Arts and Culture Aotearoa is a member of the Arts For All Otago Network. If you would like to become a member, please contact Claire Noble (T: 04 802 4349 E: claire.noble@artsaccess.org.nz).
Relaxed Performance of *Puss in Boots*

To help you prepare for your visit to The Court Theatre we have put together this information pack.

1. **Arriving at The Court Theatre**

   When you arrive at the theatre you can park for free or get dropped off in our car park opposite the theatre.

Come into the theatre through these doors.
This is the foyer where you can relax before the performance.

This is the box office where you need to collect your ticket.

Before the show you can visit the toilets. They are off the hall opposite the box office.
Use the drawing tables to colour in a picture.

Visit the coffee bar, where you can buy drinks and snacks.

When it is time to go into the theatre, give the ushers your ticket and they will show you through these doors into the auditorium.
This is the auditorium where you will watch the show. You can choose any seat to sit in. The auditorium won’t be full so you can change seats during the show if you would like to.

If you need to leave the performance for a break that is ok. You can chill out in the foyer until you are ready to go back in.

2. Watching the Show

- At the start of the show the lights will come down. This is so you can see what is happening on stage. It won’t be completely dark.
- During the show three actors will come on stage to tell you a story. This is a musical so sometimes they will sing songs.
- Sometimes the actors might ask you for ideas or your help. You can join in if you want to.
- In the show there are some colourful flashing lights and a disco ball.
- During the show Puss and the shoemaker meet an ogre. He is behind a screen and turns into lots of different animals.
- Puss pretends to eat a mouse in the show, don’t worry it isn’t real.
- Near the end of the show Puss will ask for some volunteers to go on stage. If you want to go up just put your hand up, if you get chosen you can take someone in your family with you if you like.
- You will know the show has finished because the actors will take a bow.
- At the end of the show the actors will meet you in the foyer to say hi before you go home.
- If there is an earthquake the theatre is very safe. Stay in your seat and wait for someone to tell you how to leave the building safely.
The Characters

It is important to remember, even if a person acts like a bad or scary character, they are just pretending. They are not like that in real life.

Since there are so many different characters some actors will play more than one character. If this happens they will be wearing different costumes to show you which character they are.

In the show you will meet these characters:

**The Shoemaker:** He makes the best shoes and is head over heels in love with Princess Grace. Puss convinces him to pretend to be The Duke of Canterbury to try and impress the princess.

**Princess Grace:** She loves animals and wants to be a vet when she grows up. She is head over heels in love with the shoemaker.
**Puss in Boots:** A talking cat who tries to help the shoemaker to marry the princess.

**Queen Hippolotta:** She loves chocolate and really thinks that Princess Grace should marry a rich prince.

**Ogre:** To succeed in their plan Puss and the Shoemaker have to defeat the ogre. He has a special power which means he can turn into all different kinds of animals.