Fawning, Masking, and Working as an Intimacy Professional on the Autism Spectrum

Elaine Brown—*Independent artist*

About the Author:
Elaine Brown (they/them) is a Chicago-based intimacy practitioner cultivating and advocating for sustainable working environments for theatre artists through consent-based practices, having graduated from Columbia College Chicago (CCC) with a BA in Acting in Fall 2023. Elaine enjoys working as a liaison between the production team and actors to bring their creative vision to life while ensuring artists feel that they can set and maintain boundaries in their process through shared language. Elaine loves diving into modern adaptions/retellings and new works highlighting queer and neurodiverse representation. Favorite past intimacy choreography credits include Stupid F#@*ing Bird (Bluebird Arts), Fallen Angels Hotel (Frantic Theatre Company), and Late: A Cowboy Song (CCC). When not immersed in intimacy direction/choreography, you can often find Elaine greeting absolutely every dog they meet on the street or curled up at home with a queer novel.

My name is Elaine Brown and I'm an intimacy practitioner. I'm also on the autism spectrum.

In the first two decades of my life, I felt constantly met by people who thought they knew more about autism from reading about it than I did from my own lived experience. People would even dismiss my own lived experience in favor of Random Neurotypical Author #229. Exploring autism-focused searches or hashtags on social media, especially on platforms like TikTok and Instagram reels, reveals that many other people on the spectrum share my experience of facing—and wanting to push back against—stereotypes developed by the neurotypical population. One of the most common stereotypes I have come across is that folx on the autism spectrum are simply born devoid of empathy and incapable of developing it throughout life experiences. The reality could not be further from that ignorance-based sentiment. Many people on the autism spectrum are shown to have even more intense empathy than their neurotypical peers (Rudy 2023); in fact, Lisa Jo Rudy (2023) writes that while some people on the autism spectrum may not express empathy the way that neurotypical individuals have been socialized to, "affective empathy—which is based on instincts and involuntary responses to the emotions of others—can be strong and overwhelming" for folx on the autism spectrum. This is only one of many misunderstandings and assumptions that many neurotypical people hold about their peers on the autism spectrum. As demonstrated by Rudy, the opposite of the assumption is true. For this reason, cultural competency related to neurodiversity, different ways in which neurodiverse folx experience the world, and communication styles shared among people on the autism spectrum could help the artistic community collaborate with neurodiverse artists more effectively—and the artistic community needs to recognize the value that people on the autism spectrum bring to artistic work.

I had incredible opportunities to learn from intimacy professionals while studying at Columbia College Chicago (CCC), namely Greg Geffrard (he/him/his) and Laura Sturm (she/her/hers). I first met adjunct faculty member Laura Sturm in the spring 2020 semester, mere weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic ripped through Chicago. Like many others, Sturm took the time during the pandemic to further her education and take intimacy classes and workshops. As CCC returned in person and we met again, she quickly became a dedicated mentor to me and never shied away from learning from her students, just as we learn from her. Sturm approaches intimacy through a vibrantly intersectional lens, where queer and neurodiverse folx are at the forefront when asking questions related to how we can keep pushing the industry to engage in emerging and

evolving best practices. Additionally, Sturm opened the door for me in my first professional production as an intimacy choreographer, and I credit a great deal of my growth in this field to her guidance and mentorship. I would be remiss if I did not point out that I would very likely be half the practitioner I am now had it not been for her dedication to empowering diverse students.

Also at CCC, Greg Geffrard's Intimacy Choreography/Directing class provided me with the specific intimacy choreography training, techniques, and theory that became the foundation for my own work.[1] Geffrard had a number of mantras he would share with our class, and my favorite (that is actually my computer background) is, "Your boundaries are your boundaries and they are perfect exactly where they are." I bring that phrase with me to every boundary workshop and every rehearsal—it has become a mantra in my own life. At that time, Geffrard was the resident intimacy consultant at Steppenwolf Theatre and an associate faculty member with Theatrical Intimacy Education, in addition to working as a practitioner-in-residence at CCC. I worked as a TA for Geffrard, which is when I started leading boundary workshops for various productions on campus. Through working with Geffrard on shows at CCC and learning from him in class, I also studied *Staging Sex* by Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard, co-founders of Theatrical Intimacy Education. *Staging Sex* became a foundational guide in starting my practice as an intimacy professional; Pace and Rikard's detailing of power structures in the introduction massively broadened my understanding of the role that power plays in the rehearsal process:

> As the director you may not feel powerful—you probably feel stressed, underpaid, underslept, overjoyed, frustrated, elated, all in different measures. But those feelings don't undermine your power. Neither does a good intimacy practice. This system is not about empowering actors at the expense of directors, but rather actors and directors alike gaining a vocabulary to meet the demands of the art they are creating together. (Pace and Rikard 2020, 7)

This technique of establishing a shared vocabulary between actors and directors is similar to how I have experienced people on the spectrum communicate with each other about emotions, sensory issues, or the act of navigating life in a very neurotypical world. The main difference I have found is that an IC will explicitly establish this with the ensemble, whereas folx on the spectrum tend to implicitly establish a shared language, often with a patterned repetition of specific words, intonations, or gestures. With some of my closest friends on the spectrum, we often joke that we are sort of parrots to each other in that once we hear a certain word said in a certain tone, we will continue to say it that way for months (especially if it is current popular internet lingo that our

neurotypical pals are using). Social media platforms have facilitated strengthening of neurodiverse communities by providing a space for people to easily find one another, connect, and learn from one another. Partially through these online communities, it has become apparent that many neurodiverse folx interested in intimacy work already have many of the tools required in an intimacy professional's toolbelt.

As I have found in my academic and professional experiences, working as an intimacy choreographer requires great empathy; it asks you to hold space for the most vulnerable people in the room and find ethical practices for helping create a safer workplace in the theatre industry. People who believe that folx on the autism spectrum do not have the capacity for empathy may argue that this belief would render us ineffective in this field, but as already established, this belief is incorrect. The vast capacity for affective empathy demonstrated by many neurodiverse people makes those of us in this field strong IC candidates; we are able to sense and feel the emotions of others very well, even when our displays of empathy do not align with the socialized expectations of the neurotypical population. And because many people with autism have spent their lifetime immersed in neurotypical expectations, we have developed cultural competence related to the dominant neurotypical culture. Moreover, an IC on the autism spectrum is likely to have cultural competence when working and communicating with other neurodiverse artists, whereas neurotypical people have not honed their awareness of the specific needs and communication styles of people on the autism spectrum. Therefore, neurodiverse ICs may benefit from the enhanced empathy and cultural competency that comes from our neurodiversity. If we reinforce societal narratives that neurodiverse people are not capable or not properly emotionally equipped, what impact might that have on young neurodiverse kids and students who think they can only *look* at a vibrantly artistic career and life through a window from the other side? How do we ensure that we uplift neurodiverse artists as adults so that neurodiverse kids see themselves reflected and know they are just as capable?

I surround myself with many other queer, neurodiverse people, and we often talk about our shared experiences living on the autism spectrum. One of those common threads is almost immediately being aware, consciously or subconsciously, of the power dynamic in the room when walking in. That is a vital tool in working as an intimacy professional; this job asks you to notice the power dynamics in play and actively call attention to them. The more we pretend that power dynamics don't exist, the more we amplify those in power to take advantage of the vulnerable

people in the space. The more we call attention to those power dynamics and remind people that they are fully allowed to say "no" and set boundaries, the safer the industry becomes.

My lived experience as an artist on the spectrum has made me particularly aware of power dynamics and how to look out for the vulnerable people in the room. For example, I was always the quiet kid in elementary school; while that acquired me the occasional odd look from a peer, being quieter allowed me the sensorial room to observe. My brain wasn't hyper-focused on the right thing to say, so it freed up that availability to observe the social interactions around me. From there, I grew a deeper awareness of power dynamics in the spaces I was in, and I started to realize there often were vulnerable people in the room other than just myself (shocking, I know). Some lovely folx brought to my attention recently the idea that life sometimes teaches us to look out for others, but not necessarily *how* to. The foundational question I ask as a way to look out for others is simply: "What do you need?" I used to ask, "What do you want?" but that would elicit responses along the lines of "a million dollars" or "a six-month vacation." As I started training to be an intimacy choreographer in college, that question "What do you need?" popped up time and time again, because it is also a foundational question in Geffrard's approach to working as an intimacy practitioner. Being on the autism spectrum did not inherently give me all the tools to take care of vulnerable people, but in my experience, it allowed me to tune into my observational instincts, which I feel is an important skill for an intimacy practitioner to possess. Training as an intimacy choreographer has taught me how to effectively, ethically, and efficiently look out for folx in a way that positively impacts the nature of an industry that is notorious for taking advantage of young artists, especially those who are fem-coded, BIPOC, queer, from a lower socio-economic status, or marginalized due to other elements of their identity.

Boundary workshops allow the intimacy practitioner to work with the actors, director, and stage management team early in the rehearsal process before physical blocking is implemented. I am very pro-boundaries, so these workshops are always exciting for me; it is incredible to watch it dawn on the faces of a roomful of semi-anxious actors that they are perfectly valid in setting boundaries and perfectly capable of respecting their peers' boundaries. In assisting Geffrard with these workshops and then leading my own, I learned more about fawning, the lesser-known fourth survival state, next to fight, flight, and freeze. In a *Psychology Today* article, Ingrid Clayton writes, "We surrender our boundaries and lack assertiveness when we are fawning. We over accommodate, appease and submit to the very person or people who have harmed us" (2023).

Anybody can enter a fawn survival state. However, some neurodiverse folx, especially folx on the autism spectrum, often live in a fawn state, especially when aware of the power dynamics in the room. Honey Bachan, a neurodiverse business coach, posted a couple of TikTok videos about her interpretation of "fawning" and "masking." In the caption, she stated that both are: "self-negation of a body-mind connection (ignoring cues from the physical and mental bodies) in exchange for the perceived worth of social relationships" (Bachan 2023). This self-negation often occurs when there is a heightened power dynamic in play, such as in the director-actor relationship, or there is abuse from an authority figure in the room. Even if the director is the most warm, welcoming person outside the theater, they still hold power in the space due to the position they hold, and that can activate a fawn survival state for someone simply trying to appease their director.

Introduced to Theatrical Intimacy Education's teachings and practices through Geffrard's classes and mentorship, I learned "button" can be an excellent self-care cue; calling "button" in a rehearsal space is essentially like hitting a pause button on a remote. An actor might use this if they feel their boundaries are being crossed, if they need a moment to breathe before continuing, or if they want to step out of the space to assess what they need for a few minutes before returning. If folx prefer a nonverbal self-care cue, I suggest another tool I learned from Geffrard: a double tap with their hand somewhere like the upper chest or head. This also serves as a cue for others in the space to ask, "What do you need?" Of course, "button" does not work for shows if it is a word that appears in the script or if the production team references building a "button" for the end of the scene; I introduce "button" as a basis for each show I work on, but I encourage every ensemble to pick their own self-care cue word, so long as it is not in the script, as it will be unique and simply more fun for folx. Neutral, de-loaded, two syllable example self-care cue words could be: hot dog, popcorn, yee-haw, ding-dong, and so many more. It is vital to use a self-care cue if you enter a survival state or find yourself saying "yes" to the person in power when you want to say "no."

Many folx on the spectrum spend a great deal of time and effort "masking"—or attempting to present as neurotypical in order to make those around us comfortable—which is a similar cognitive process to experiencing the fawn survival state. Both cognitive processes suppress the individual's needs in an attempt to avoid harm from another individual. For many on the autism spectrum, this might look like forcing or faking eye contact during conversations when we do not feel equipped to do so, scripting conversations in advance, and especially pushing through sensory discomfort in ways that appear "normal" to neurotypical people. These sensory discomforts impact

each person differently, and overcoming these discomforts looks different for each person. Sensory discomfort can come from loud noises, bright lights, big crowds, small spaces, different textures on clothes or food; these elements of daily life which are relatively easy for neurotypical people to ignore can cause great discomfort or mental torment for people on the autism spectrum. But many of us have learned that we are not socially allowed to take care of ourselves when we are feeling this distress. Instead, we mask or fawn and force ourselves to adapt to the comfort needs of the neurotypical people in the room. Cultural competency related to neurodiversity and neurodiverse artists is important to the work of an IC, then, so that intimacy practitioners can better understand when consent is consent versus when it is masking or fawning.

Society tells us we must suppress our natural reactions to those sensory-stimulating things to survive and function in a neurotypical society. It is outwardly saying "yes" when everything in our brains and bodies is saying "no." This means that quite often, what appears to be consent is actually fawning—it is "agreeing" in order to survive the moment. But survival is never consent. However, if participants in the room do not understand the concepts of masking or fawning—and especially if they lack the cultural competency to recognize that someone is masking—there may be an assumption of consent that causes harm. Cultural competency is relevant in every process because neurodiverse artists may be in any or every production without outing themselves by explicitly stating their neurodiversity. Furthermore, masking is something to be aware of as a neurodiverse artist, so that you can better care for yourself in these moments. And for neurotypical folx, it is something to be mindful of when working with neurodiverse artists. A common thread between nearly all performers is that at some point, we had a director, instructor, or mentor effectively train us to say "yes." And if neurotypical actors are often taught that way, imagine the effects on an actor on the autism spectrum. The impulse to say "yes," to please the person in power at the expense of one's own well-being comes in that much stronger.

Realizing the connection between fawning and masking through my studies and rehearsals has driven me to work as an intimacy professional. I know through my lived experience on the autism spectrum that working as an intimacy choreographer and director is not just something I am capable of doing at par but something that my unique brain chemistry may give me an even greater capacity to navigate. My goal is to uplift the voices in the room who have been fed a narrative that their boundaries do not matter and that they will be labeled "difficult to work with"

if they say no. Intimacy practitioners are working to change that, and neurodiverse artists could immeasurably strengthen this still-new and growing field.

For anyone who has ever been told otherwise: words matter. Your words matter. Your boundaries matter. And for my other pals on the autism spectrum: living on the autism spectrum is not a hindrance. You are valid. You are capable.

[1] Most of the techniques taught by Geffrard came from the research and teaching of Laura Rikard and Chelsea Pace, founders of Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE). Until Fall of 2023, Geffrard was working with Columbia College to build a curriculum for an intimacy choreography program, rooted in the work of TIE. This note from the field references Geffrard heavily, but acknowledges that much of his work was building upon the collaborative work and research of TIE's founders and faculty.

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