

discover inclusive theater

By Ellen Mintzer

Attending an Inclusive Theater of Western New York (ITOWNY) performance is like being welcomed into a family. Aimee Levesque, ITOWNY's executive director, greets guests at the box office with a warm smile and genuine enthusiasm. Her daughter, Jessica, is starring in this production of Baroness von Smith's play "And Where Will You Put the Things You Save?" and Aimee's excitement and pride is palpable.

The show is staged at the intimate Alleyway Theater with a great view of the stage from any seat. Before the show begins, Aimee and ITOWNY's creative director, Marilyn Erentson-Scott, step out to welcome the audience; they have a crew member who is sick at home on speakerphone, and they invite the audience to send her a message of goodwill. The audience cheers wildly.

This warm and welcoming atmosphere is representative of what makes ITOWNY so special. Aimee founded the organization in November 2015 after noticing that there was a dearth of opportunities for people with disabilities in mainstream local theater. Jessica, who has autism, has always had a passion for acting, but was feeling discouraged by her audition experiences. Aimee relates, "Jessica got a lot of no's. They told her she could stand in the back and snap," capturing how Jessica and other people with disabilities were either simply not being cast in shows or not being considered for bigger roles."

ITOWNY partners with Ujima Company, Inc, a local theater company which is committed to the performance of African-American theater. Aimee served on the board of Ujima Company before founding ITOWNY, and although she relished this role, she still felt there was a need for more people with disabilities to participate in theater. She relates her thought process in the early stages of planning for ITOWNY, saying, "Wouldn't it be amazing if people had a space to succeed? Anybody, when given an opportunity to succeed, will show up." Aimee decided to create that space to help meet the needs of an underserved community.

ITOWNY runs a writing workshop that meets weekly, where community members — some disabled, some not, some who disclose their disability, some who don't — can gather. Like all marginalized communities, the voices of those who have disabilities are too often erased, overlooked, or even suppressed, and Aimee stresses the importance of allowing the people in the workshop to write down and share their own stories. "People may

be unable to speak about something, but they can write about it," she says. In the past, the workshop participants have written and staged personal narratives, a deeply empowering experience.



ITOWNY has many exciting events scheduled for the coming year. The writing workshop will continue, and a festival of short ten-minute plays is planned for the spring. Over the summer, ITOWNY plans to hold a "rogue theater" event, in which participants will write and stage a play over the course of a mere seven-hour day. Aimee emphasizes that the cast and crew of ITOWNY's shows are paid professionals, and that the theater is not about pandering, but rather about offering legitimate professional opportunities to people regardless of ability. ITOWNY hopes to continue to grow and provide opportunities for all people to feel empowered and reclaim their agency. For more information, visit inclusivetheaterofwny.com.

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