

Sarah Hillman | Wednesday, July 25, 2018

The Wharton Center Now Offers Sensory Friendly Performances

Not everyone gets to enjoy a live theatre performance. Some people miss out because they, or a member of their family, are on the autism spectrum or they have a sensory processing disorder that prevents them from enjoying the experience. So far, it's been the reason many hundreds of Capital area residents have missed out on the joy of watching a stage production. But thanks to MSU's Wharton Center for the Performing Arts and Delta Dental, that's no longer an issue.

So far this summer, the Wharton has offered sensory friendly performances for both *Clementine* and *The Lion King*, and they have plans to keep adding shows to that list. "The Wharton is an advocate of accessibility services," says Bob Hoffman, Public Relations Manager at The Wharton. "According to the CDC, someone is diagnosed with autism every 15 minutes in America, so that's a large population of people on the spectrum who don't get to enjoy theatre. We'd like the Wharton to be accessible, welcoming and comfortable to everyone."

For those of you who aren't sure what a sensory friendly performance is, Margaret Trimer, Director of Communications and Corporate Citizenship at Delta Dental, the generous sponsors behind the shows, shares some of the features:

- Lower sound levels
- No potentially sudden or startling sounds and lights throughout the show
- Low level house and stage lights throughout the show
- Designated quiet areas during the performance for anyone feeling overwhelmed or needing some time in silence

"People are free to stand or move about during the show." Trimer explains, "We have sensory supports like earplugs and noise cancelling headphones available for anyone who needs them, and there are trained professionals and volunteers on hand throughout the performance."

And what was it that prompted Delta Dental to start sponsoring sensory friendly shows in the first place? "As part of Delta Dental's mission of building brighter futures, we're committed to building healthy, smart and viable communities, which means offering opportunities for all families to experience the arts." Trimer says. Next up on the sensory friendly agenda is *Junie B. Jones* and *Rosie The Riveter*, both of which are coming to the Wharton later this year.

"The Lion King is an amazing show to work with from a sensory friendly perspective." Hoffman says, "They've done sensory friendly performances before, and it was such a hit. People loved it! They kept coming up to us afterwards and saying 'thank you!' We were told by so many people that they couldn't have come to a show if we hadn't done this type of performance, and we love the idea that everyone can be included!"