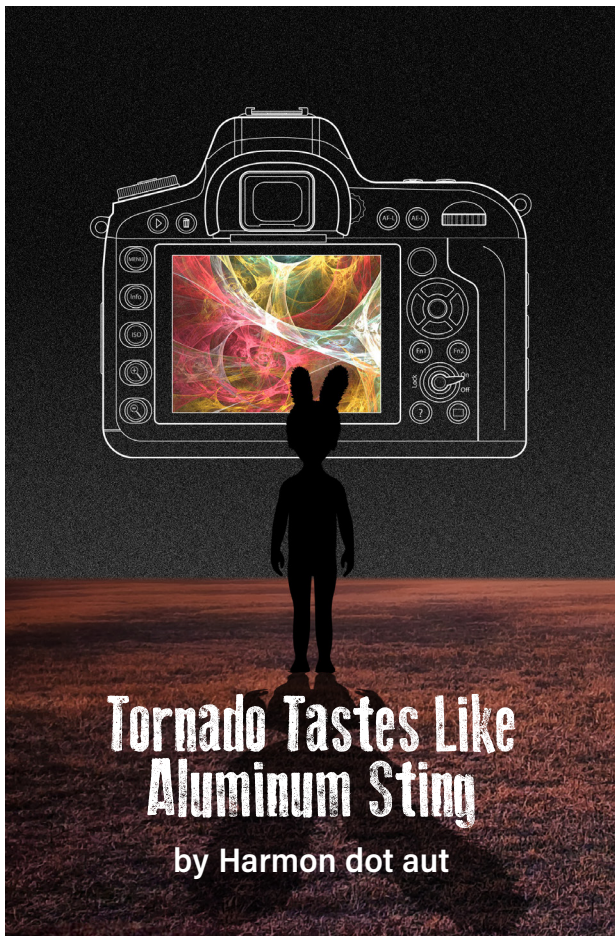


# CONTEMPORARY COMPANION

for *Tornado Tastes Like Aluminum Sting*

by Harmon Dot Aut

created by Craven Poole, Dramaturg



Chantal Buñuel is an 11-year-old attempting to navigate life as an autistic child with synesthesia alongside their loving, imperfect parents. Chantal Buñuel is also a 19-year-old filmmaker creating a surreal horror-comedy about their parents' death. *Tornado Tastes Like Aluminum Sting* is the nonlinear, sensorial memorial that springs up where grief meets art. How do you cut a film together using only fragments of memory and incomplete character portraits?

## AUTISM AND ME (AND YOU, AND THEM, AND EVERYONE ELSE)

Autism spectrum disorder is a condition that falls under the umbrella of Neurodiversity, meaning a difference in neurotype. The fundamental functions of the brain are atypical, diverging from the processing and experience of the average person. Neurodivergence can be genetic or acquired, and it includes but is not limited to autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, Down's syndrome, Tourette's syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, traumatic brain injuries obtained during medical incidents, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Atypical neurotypes are also often comorbid with other physical and mental conditions. For example, the main character in *Tornado* is autistic, but they also have ADHD, synesthesia and an intolerance to gluten. These are all common comorbidities, but there are many more. As a result, the lived experience of one autistic person may vary widely from that of another, though both have the same condition. The spectrum is not a range of 'less autistic' to 'more autistic,' but instead a complex interweaving of symptoms and behaviors.

Autistic advocate (and autistic person) Dr Stephen Shore once said, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." You cannot base your understanding of autism off of one representation of it. Our intention with *Tornado* is not to tell THE autism story, but one story out of an infinite variety. Our cast and crew include a variety of neurodivergent and autistic people, and the richness of their experiences informed our work.

## THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF AUTISM

When understanding the autistic experience in the United States, there are a lot of studies and statistics to parse. One must always approach these sorts of broad generalizations with care. In the vastness of human experience, interest in properly studying neurodivergent conditions is still relatively new. As a result, these studies can often be imperfect and tinged with bias.

For example, the primary diagnostic criteria for autism are largely based off studies of white, male children. However, due to a wide range of cultural, societal and interpersonal factors,

an autistic person born outside of that demographic may present in entirely different ways. Male and female children are often socialized differently regarding things like working together, assimilating to a group and 'keeping the peace.' As a result, there is a growing population of women who are being formally diagnosed with autism later in life. Their parents and doctors missed the signs because their socialization masked them.

It's a similar story with autistic people of color. Children of color often have very different upbringings from white children due to the influences of institutional and historical racism on their communities. These systemic effects can contribute to economic inequalities as well, leading to children of color in some communities not receiving the same level of healthcare as their white counterparts. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; the criteria are based off white children, so girls and children of color go undiagnosed, therefore enforcing the flawed thesis that autism is more common in white, male children. Unfortunately, this often results in other children going without appropriate care, or even being misdiagnosed with other behavioral disorders and receiving inappropriate, sometimes harmful treatment. The scientific community is still attempting to understand how autism functions in these underserved demographics.

There are very interesting facts to be found at the intersection of autism and other identities as well. The field is still young, but scientists are discovering interesting links between autism and the rates of non-straight sexualities and gender non-conformity. Some preliminary exploratory studies are suggested that autistic people may be two or three times more likely to identify as an orientation other than straight. They suggest a similar rate for autistic people who identify somewhere under the transgender umbrella. What might contribute to these statistics? Are autistic people actually more likely to be LGBTQIA? Or, perhaps, are autistic people simply more likely to see the world differently, and therefore not operate under the assumption they are straight until proven otherwise? The field is too young to make any definite conclusions.

Beyond race, orientation and neurotype, there is a further demographic that is critically important to the present and future of autistic people in America. Though it's very difficult to measure, scientists are suggesting that the rate of unemployment for autistic adults is significantly higher than that of neurotypical people, with some even estimating the number to be as high as 85%. What could lead to this number? Imagine this scenario: Paula is an autistic woman. She was diagnosed young and was raised by an involved, proactive family. She grew up in a small town with an underfunded school system. When she went to school, the administration did not have the resources to accommodate their disabled students. Without accommodations, Paula struggled in

class and did not get good grades. She also found it difficult to socialize with her neurotypical peers and did not participate in extracurriculars. When she graduated high school, Paula was not an attractive college candidate on paper. However, she managed to get into a school that had the major she wanted. This subject was fascinating to Paula, and she found studying it easy. However, the college she attended had many infractions due to not meeting the legal accommodation requirements. Without the support, she once again struggled. She couldn't go to another school however – her transcripts weren't good enough. Perhaps Paula graduated from an unimpressive school, or perhaps the lack of accommodation forced her to drop out. Either way, she is not an attractive job candidate despite her passion and skill for her field. When she goes to job interviews, her autism makes it difficult for her to navigate the interpersonal intricacies required. She would do a great job, if anyone would hire her. But no one does. This is only one scenario out of the countless stacking complexities that make it hard for an autistic person to get a stable job. Once they get jobs, many autistic people find that their bosses are incapable of unwilling of providing any accommodation to allow them to perform effectively. Scientists estimate that of autistic adults who do enter the workforce, it's a small percentage who manage to stay in that full-time job for longer than a year.

CATF and the production team of *Tornado* aim to address this inequality through the equitable payment of all neurodivergent members of our cast and crew. We invite our audience to confront any of their pre-held notions about what autism is, or what an autistic person looks like. In the arts, a true diversity of experience can only make our work more effective and profound.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Article: "[The Female Autism Phenotype and Camouflaging: a Narrative Review](#)" by Laura Hall, K. V. Petrides & William Mandy

Article: "[Timing of the Diagnosis of Autism in African American Children](#)" by John N. Constantino, et al.

Webinar: "[Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)" by Eileen Crahan

Article: "[Predictors of employment status among adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)" by Alisha Ohl, et al.



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