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COMMON SENSES CONVENES WORLD-RENOWNED ARTISTS, WRITERS, AND ADVOCATES FOR TWO-WEEK FESTIVAL AIMED AT DISABILITY ACCEPTANCE, SEPTEMBER 13–27, 2026

2026 Edition of the Celebratory and Urgent Festival Features *Rhythm Bath*, an Immersive Dance-Installation by MacArthur Genius Grant-Winning Choreographer Susan Marshall and Tony Award and Genius Grant Recipient Set Designer Mimi Lien, Presented in Partnership with Omaha Performing Arts

Alex Green, National Book Critics Circle Award-Winning Author of *A Perfect Turmoil: Walter E. Fernald and the Struggle to Care for America's Disabled*, to Deliver Keynote Address

Common Senses Joins Forces with MASS Design Group to Begin Creating a National Monument Honoring Lives Lost at State-Run Institutions

Festival's Preferred Interest Program—Facilitating Enjoyment and Exploration of Neurodiverse Individuals' Hobbies—This Year Celebrates Trains and Features the Photography of Acclaimed Autistic Photographer Blair Bunting, with The Durham Museum as Co-Presenter

Common Senses Festival (Founder and Director, **Kate Noble Weitz**) returns to Omaha **September 13–27, 2026**, with a robust lineup of multi-sensory programming that explores and celebrates the uniqueness and commonalities of all of humanity, with a focus on arts, science, and disability acceptance. Following 2025's theme of "Voice," this year's festival turns to "**Move**," a theme carried through a headlining immersive dance installation, a new movement-centered edition of the festival's sensory theater experience for adults, and a Preferred Interests track devoted to trains. Common Senses 2026 also marks the launch of a new collaboration with Boston's **MASS Design Group** to begin imagining a national monument honoring the lives lost at state-run institutions across the country. Full programming is available at commonsensesfestival.org.

More than just a festival, Common Senses aims to launch a movement. It was founded and is led by **Kate Noble Weitz**, a former opera administrator whose son, at three years old, was diagnosed with autism. Weitz, her husband, and son were abruptly met with the vast challenges of inaccessibility and insufficient services throughout Omaha and Nebraska. Weitz sought to educate herself to approach the diagnosis, and to advocate for change in Omaha, from a place as thoroughly informed by research and strengths-based practices as by experience: she's a

LEND graduate from Stony Brook University, where she also earned a microcredential in the Science and Lived Experience of Autism (ISLEA). Weitz started the festival in 2022, applying her steadfast belief in art's ability to catalyze change to shifting discourse around disability and offering otherwise unavailable experiences that resonate on both a local and national level. Now in its fifth year and operating as its own nonprofit, the festival has welcomed visitors from hundreds of zip codes and dozens of states.

Weitz has long framed the festival's mission as one that reaches well beyond the autism and disability communities it was built to serve. As she told the *Omaha World-Herald* when the festival first launched, providing access to people who are disabled (or otherwise marginalized) benefits everyone. She has described the festival's hands-on exhibits in similar terms: engaging directly with adaptive technology, she has said, "creates a type of empathy you don't get from just watching or reading about something." That philosophy runs through every track of the 2026 festival—such as its Preferred Interest programs, where Weitz urges families to "lean into what your kid wants" rather than trying to "program out" what makes a child unique.

The 2025 Common Senses Festival was a resounding success, anchored by the world premiere of *Sensorium Ex*, an innovative opera commissioned by Common Senses and VisionIntoArt, and composed by Paola Prestini with a libretto by Brenda Shaughnessy. *Sensorium Ex* attracted national media attention, including from NPR and PBS NewsHour, for its groundbreaking use of AI to give voice to nonverbal performers. Developed over five years using artificial intelligence and vocal sampling to build an expressive voice for nonverbal actors, the production cast two nonverbal actors, Kader Ziouche and Jakob Jordan, to share the role of Kitsune. Jordan, who has autism and apraxia, told NPR after the premiere that it was "mind-blowing to be in an opera"—a line that captured the spirit of a festival built to expand who gets to be heard, on stage and off.

Performing Arts

Common Senses 2026's headliner, *Rhythm Bath*, makes its Omaha premiere in the **Scott Recital Hall at the Holland Center**, presented in partnership with **Omaha Performing Arts**. Created by choreographer **Susan Marshall** and Tony Award-winning set designer **Mimi Lien**—both recipients of the MacArthur Foundation's "Genius" Fellowship—this innovative dance-installation offers a paradigm shift in theater-going, one in which the audience is free to roam throughout the performance. Attendees enter a space of rhythmic music and movement, floating fabric, and glimmering light, where there is no "right" way to be: audience members may sit, lounge, stand, walk, or roll; they can come and go as they please, and the dance will adjust to wherever they are.

Developed over several years in residencies at Princeton University, Montclair State University, and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and co-produced with the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University, *Rhythm Bath* was created in ongoing conversation with the neurodiverse community. Marshall—a Guggenheim Fellow and three-time "Bessie" Award winner—has described the project as growing out of her life as the parent of a neurodiverse adult son, and

her interest in what it means to be a “good” audience member. Lien, a Tony Award winner for *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* and the first (and to date, only) set designer to receive a MacArthur, brings her architectural eye for immersive environments to the production’s floating, cocoon-like installation. At Common Senses Festival, *Rhythm Bath* will offer ASL interpretation, audio description, and a quiet lounge for attendees who need it.

Back by popular demand after selling out every performance in 2025, ***Risky Disco*** returns in a new edition, ***Risky Disco on Wheels***, built around this year’s theme of movement. Common Senses’ immersive sensory theater experience for adults will once again be led by **Carrie Nath** (BLUEBARN Theatre and Common Senses Co-Director of Immersive Theatre) and **Katy Kepler** (Common Senses Co-Director for Immersive Theatre and Resident Artist), the local sensory-theater experts instrumental to the production’s success last year.

Science & Technology

One of the most popular programs of the inaugural (2022) Common Senses Festival was the **Sensory 101**, an interactive installation exploring all eight senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, hearing, vestibular, proprioception, and interoception—developed in collaboration with Creighton University’s Occupational and Physical Therapy Departments. Inspired by that program’s success, Common Senses is partnering with New York-based international production company **The Office** (the *Powerhouse: International* festival, *Amal Walks Across America*) to create a new, modular touring version of the playground, the **Sensory Yard**, blending art, accessibility, and occupational therapy. In this iteration, Common Senses is inviting artists to work alongside scientists and therapists so that art and science are equally represented in a visually captivating, hands-on installation.

Common Senses also continues **Believe in Science**, its quarterly conversation series featuring leading experts across science, medicine, and public health. (Visit commonsensesfestival.org for an archive of past conversations.)

Preferred Interests

The subject of this year’s Preferred Interest track—the program that honors the festival’s roots in providing space for neurodivergent individuals’ special interests—is **trains**. Many neurodiverse people have preferred interests that are often stigmatized as “restrictive” or “repetitive”; Common Senses highlights the evidence-based science showing that embracing preferred interests leads to less anxiety, more positive outlooks, and often career paths, compared to suppressing them.

In partnership with the **Durham Museum**, Common Senses will invite train enthusiasts to experience various aspects of trains, including engines, schedules, and model trains. Celebrated autistic photographer **Blair Bunting** will showcase his train photography and speak about his two preferred interests: trains and photography. Bunting, whose body of work includes commissions from commercial clients including Discovery Channel and Chevrolet, discovered a

parallel calling photographing freight trains near his Flagstaff, Arizona, home—chasing locomotives for hours at a stretch, sometimes returning to the same stretch of track five times to get a single shot. He has described the pursuit as a source of calm: standing trackside, he has said, “allows me to breathe a little bit better.”

The train theme builds on the beloved Preferred Interest program that debuted last year, focused on elevators: ***Going Up: The Elevator Experience***, a scavenger hunt through the elevators of downtown Omaha’s office towers. *Going Up* returned to the FNBO Tower in April 2026 in partnership with Autism Action Partnership.

Film & Discourse

Once again partnering with **Film Streams**, Common Senses will present films featuring themes and artists connected to the 2026 festival programming, with select screenings followed by panel discussions inviting audience members to interact with the films’ creators. This year’s lineup includes ***Life After***, the Sundance-winning documentary from disabled filmmaker **Reid Davenport**, whose debut feature, *I Didn’t See You There*, won the Directing Award for U.S. Documentary at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. *Life After* traces what became of Elizabeth Bouvia, a disabled Californian woman whose 1983 legal fight for the “right to die” ignited a national debate, and asks what her story reveals about how society values disabled lives today. The film won the U.S. Documentary Special Jury Award at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival and aired nationally on PBS’s *Independent Lens*.

Building on the success of past collaborations, Common Senses and Film Streams have also launched a new year-round program of **Relaxed Screenings** at both the Dundee and downtown locations—lower sound levels, partially raised house lights, and sensory kits available on request—expanding sensory-friendly movie-going in Omaha well beyond the festival’s two-week run.

Common Conversations

Common Conversations, the discourse arm of Common Senses, once again offers two days of crucial conversations during the festival, centered around topics of disability in the arts and disability acceptance and justice. The programming includes the festival’s keynote address, which will be delivered on **September 25** by **Alex Green**, author of ***A Perfect Turmoil: Walter E. Fernald and the Struggle to Care for America’s Disabled***, winner of the 2025 National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography. Green’s book traces the life of Dr. Walter E. Fernald, who in 1887 became superintendent of the nation’s oldest public school for intellectually and developmentally disabled children and went on to pioneer special education in America—before his work descended into the eugenics movement. Drawn from a decade of research and previously unexamined archives, *A Perfect Turmoil* was praised by the National Book Critics Circle jury as a book that “brings back a story that had been hidden in the archives for a century.” Green, an Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School and a visiting fellow at the Harvard Law School Project on Disability, is also the author of landmark

Massachusetts legislation creating the first disability-led human rights commission to investigate the history of state institutions for disabled people.

Common Conversations also features a panel discussion with leaders of **MASS Design Group** (Model of Architecture Serving Society), the Boston-based design collective with whom Common Senses has entered a new, multi-year collaboration.

As part of the 2026 festival, they will workshop their new endeavor, the **Monument Project**—imagining, and ultimately creating, a national monument recognizing the lives lost at state-run institutions in the United States. Common Senses undertakes the project at a moment when longstanding protections for people with disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Olmstead Decision under Title II of the ADA face new political challenges, which the organization says makes it more urgent to reckon publicly with the history of institutionalization and isolation. The project will begin by clarifying the mission and values that will guide the design and development of a monument that confronts this history while upholding the humanity of the people who endured it—asking what steps can activate a larger national conversation, and how visitors will come to understand the monument’s relevance and immediacy.

Kate Noble Weitz said, “The 2026 Common Senses Festival programming is dynamic. We're highlighting how we all collectively move through the world, whether it's dancing, swinging, climbing or watching our favorite trains come down the track. I cannot wait to share it all with the Omaha community and beyond.”

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