



The Winter's Tale Access Theatre CIO

Arts & Health South West Prize 2016 Shortlisted Case Study



Name of organisation: Access Theatre CIO

Title of project/programme: The Winter's Tale

Dates of project/programme: Winter 2015

Summary

Access Theatre Company aims to enable, empower and increase opportunities for adults with disabilities to engage in performing arts. The members of the company have varying physical, communication and learning disabilities giving them unique and differently-abled contributions as performers.

All creative projects are planned and practitioners selected by the company as a whole, consequently we have worked with a range of professional theatre and dance practitioners who have the skills are to focus on individual strengths and provide an inclusive environment in which everyone can thrive and have a voice.

Access has twelve regular members who participate along with carers and committed volunteers. The company has produced pantomimes, a murder mystery, devised theatre pieces, a short film, cabaret dance and comedy pieces for festivals and more. In 2015 the company chose to work with Paul Morel from Oddbodies Production Company in Devon. Paul works in a particular way, building stories layer upon layer and enabling participants to contribute in their own way. After working with him for a few sessions and getting to know him, the company decided they could tackle the story of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. What initially appeared ambitious and complex, by focusing on the main characters and the powerful emotional themes; jealousy, rejection, and forgiveness; became simple and completely accessible. What resulted was an extraordinarily moving production of this magical story.

"the interest and uptake engendered through your work is exceptional. This gives meaning and purpose through the medium of theatre and performance".

Peninsula Medical School undergraduate Dec 2015.

Overview

There currently exists a lack of opportunities in North Cornwall for adults with disabilities to engage in theatre activities. This view has been identified and expressed by support workers and day centre staff who attend sessions. They are frequently surprised by what individual company members can achieve "It's been good to see him have a chance to do new tasks on his own and express himself and make new friends" (Support worker).

To see them tackle Shakespeare and develop a deep understanding of the themes of the play was a revelation.

We know that drama activities increase confidence. Drama enables

deepest thoughts feelings and concerns to be heard and shared in a safe place. It is never a case of 'getting in right' but about trying something new and expressing ideas with feeling and honesty. Everyone is encouraged to express ideas and take ownership of the work they present. A fun atmosphere is maintained, although quality is never compromised, the element of fun is important and at the core of everything we do. This is achieved by ensuring projects are led by the members and shaped by their interests.

Access Theatre aims to create a supportive environment which affords social opportunities by placing great importance on mutual trust and care. This creates lasting friendships with social spin-offs such as birthday celebrations and shared experiences of holidays and family. The group continually work on skill development and work hard with different practitioners to increase knowledge and skill in various areas text, poetry, movement, music, mask, puppetry. They have observed that decision making is often eroded by a one-size-fits-all social care system and so we place high importance on everyone having their say in the group.

Access Theatre individuals are extraordinarily talented. Two young men with Downs Syndrome are exceptionally good dancers, several of the group with very limited communication enjoy singing and other with varying impairments are natural comic performers. Their differently-abled physicality and communication, when handled by a skillful director, brings out both the strengths of the performers and the different nuances of the story. The result is intensely moving. In Access' production of *The Winter's Tale*, the story of a jealous king, his abused wife and abandoned child, was distilled without losing any of its power, to a fairy story where a statue comes back to life and a king asks for forgiveness. Access Theatre embraced this story wholeheartedly.

Access Theatre meets every week at Launceston Town Hall in a large accessible space. Two performances of *The Winter's Tale* took place there. The first one was a sharing of early stage work in progress to a limited audience of friends and family. This had the benefits of introducing the themes of the story to a sympathetic audience, testing out ideas and giving the company the confidence to progress to a polished performance. Director Paul Morel, built the story week by week, adding on layers of detail as he discovered what each individual could contribute. The final production in late February was very well received and helped to increase the company's profile in the town. As well as the usual support from family and friends, the production attracted a new audience for Access' work.

"Such a wonderful group and the actors are so good and talented and

put everything in their shows, as do all the supporting staff. The Access group is important for this group of people and long may it last."

Audience comment

As a consequence of this achievement, Access decided to work with Oddbodies again and was successful with a small Arts Council Grant for the Arts for the production of the "Two Dickens' Stories" project in 2016.

Many of the company members live in residential care or supported housing in a relatively isolated rural area where transport is limited. Access Theatre know from parents and carers that attending weekly sessions is an important part of their lives. The work offers social opportunities and increases social inclusion through branching activities such as attending social events, performances and fundraising activities. The other tangible benefits to well-being are increased confidence, self-esteem and significant increase in physical activity. The work not only benefits the participants but also the support workers who attend and are encouraged to participate, this creates a mutual respect and can often enhance the relationship between participant and support worker. The company is open to accepting volunteers and has delivered workshops to health care students and had placement students attend the group. Practitioners new to working with disabilities have often come away from the experience stating that it has enhanced their practice and insight into an inclusive way of working.

Raising Access Theatre's profile has resulted in emerging partnerships with Gorfenna Day Care Farm where we have delivered outreach workshops, with Plymouth University for whom we have provided work placements for two 2nd Year Occupational Therapy Students and new dance and theatre practitioners who have seen their shows and expressed an interest in working with us in the future. Access Theatre hope to work with dance artist Lois Taylor in the near future.

Innovation

The members do not have to 'fit in' to Access Theatre, the company is shaped around the individuals and continues to shift and develop with their changing needs and wishes. The trustees and volunteers act as facilitators to implement and action the ideas expressed by the group, the company belongs to the members. Finding ways to enable the company to be proactive in developing are continually explored. Support to the participants does not begin and end with the activity. We have been able to offer crucial support to several members who have progressed to i.e further education (a Drama B-tec at City College, Plymouth), auditions

with local amateur companies (several members have independently performed in community productions at Sterts Theatre and with Animate in Plymouth) and others have taken a lead at profile events such as MCing at Funky Llama Clubs nights with Plymouth Theatre Royal.

Participation

All the dance and drama activities are fully participative and take account of difference, age and interest. Everyone is encouraged to try everything and there is a culture of tolerance that some activities will be preferred by certain members and others will accept this until it is their choice of activity.

Access Theatre strive to utilise the existing skills of the members and incorporate them into the projects.

One individual who is less able physically and who recently had a hip operation after a fall, is very interested in design and visual art. He is supported to produce posters and flyers and has recently designed a company logo.

Outcomes

Every individual within the company will experience a different outcome that is personal to them. For example, one participant in particular has thrived over the past few years. Access's networks and relationships with other companies have enabled us to signpost this particular individual to additional opportunities, with, for example, Theatre Royal Plymouth, FarFlung Dance and Attik Dance, all of which have enabled the individual to gain valuable skills and opened doors to possible career opportunities. The individual has been offered mentoring support, assistant practitioner training and additional opportunities to help plan and deliver outreach workshops.

Another participant has experience significant change at an emotional level. In the past, she had experienced extremely high levels of anxiety in social settings. Access has increased her confidence to a level where she can confidently perform in front of large audiences and freely express ideas. She has stated many times that Access is "everything to her" and is "like a family".

Evaluation was not a particularly strong point and we have developed some evaluation methods over the past year to address this. Access now collect audience feedback from every production and gather comments

and feedback from outreach workshops with a system of smiley faces developed by Occupational Therapy students on placement. Company evaluations are carried out informally but inclusively, carefully collecting comments and observations about 'best moments' and 'worst moments'.

Learning

The significant learning from this project is first and foremost that it is possible for a company of adults with learning disabilities and severe physical and communication impairments to tackle Shakespeare and produce a show of high enough quality to attract an audience. Its ambition raised the game for the company and gave the individual a huge sense of achievement and satisfaction. The second pieces of learning are on a practical level namely:

- that an early sharing of work in progress is beneficial for growing confidence, trying out ideas and getting audience buy-in at an early stage
- running public performances during the usual Monday afternoon session time, rather of a weekend evening, had the effect of reducing the stress and uncertainty around care support and transport arrangements and additional, reduced costs by not incurring extra hall hire and did not reduce the audience size as was feared.

All these learning points will be factored in to future projects.

Critical success factors

One of the most critical success factors has been to introduce a mentoring scheme. A young man in the company with Downs Syndrome is an outstanding good actor. He had a tendency to dominate and to overshadow the contributions of other performers who had a tendency to defer to him. Access Theatre recognised that he would benefit from one-to-one mentoring to help him meet his ambition of becoming a theatre practitioner himself. He is mentored by the Artistic Director and has been given the responsibility of Company Representative. He runs company warm-ups, liaises with the company members and the practitioners about any concerns and occasionally represents the company at meetings. His transformation is noticeable by everyone. He is now happy to support others and take smaller roles because he has more responsibility and status. He has been offered opportunities and training outside Access Theatre which has given him a wider perspective and increased his skills in other art forms (dance in particular).

As a consequence of this project we had the confidence to apply for an

Arts Council G4A to work with Oddbodies again in 2016 and were successful with a £7,300 grant. Early in 2016 Access Theatre were granted Charitable Status as a CIO.

Funding and Resources

The budget for this project was approximately £2,000. This covered practitioner fees of £100 per session, rehearsal space hire of £30 per week, minimal production costs and a contribution towards core costs (insurance, DBS, admin sundries). This project was not funded and so relied on regular income from participants' session fees (£5 per week), box office and own fundraising. The company members are experienced fundraisers and we were able to raise over £700 from a race night in a local pub.

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