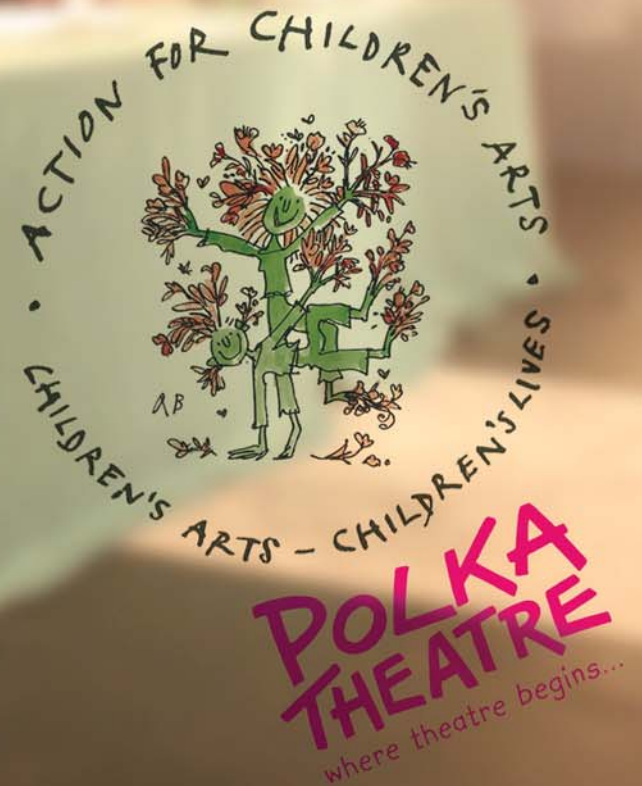


DISABILITY AND CHILDREN'S ARTS INSPIRATION DAY REPORT



Introduction

This Disability and Children's Arts Inspiration day was a safe environment in which to:

- Explore how disability is approached across different art forms and in different venues
- Hear from experts across the field not only about good practice, but also their greatest challenges and their creative solutions.
- Collectively consider the future and where we are heading.

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Publishing: A more Inclusive approach, Alexandra Strick Disability Issues Consultant, Booktrust

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Two Approaches to Inclusivity

Polka Theatre have a dual approach in catering for children with disabilities. Firstly, by making shows for children with specific disabilities in mind. This involves researching and developing small shows for the Adventure Theatre in SEN (Special Educational Needs) Schools, where the needs of their audience become a creative challenge and a core part of the theatre-making process.

Through working with primary school students in a deaf school the creative team realised how much the children rely on reading the face of the actor and the importance of facial expression far more so than hearing children. Smells and live cooking have been included for a more multisensory approach, all of which appealed to the Early Years audience.

Focusing on the Special Educational Needs of their audience were positive challenges that encouraged the creative team to use a “fuller vocabulary of theatre-making.” A future challenge is whether or not this style could be developed for larger, older audiences in bigger spaces.

There are also dedicated BSL (British Sign Language) signed performances where signers are integrated into the shows, rehearsing with the cast and becoming part of the performance.

The second strand is designed to be a bridge for disabled children in both accessing the shows and reducing the anxiety of the theatre experience. There is a long history of the arts access at Polka, the first venue to introduce “autism-friendly performances” that paved the way for others to follow. These “relaxed” performances are made unique by reducing capacity, increasing lighting and decreasing sharp sudden sounds as well as fostering a welcoming attitude to families and children with SEN.

Preparatory packs and Arts Access workshops prepare children for the experience of a visit to Polka. Alerting them from anything to the layout of the building, to the moment when the lights go off and the applause at the end. These workshops serve to reduce anxiety and stress of the unknown for such pupils.

For more details see:
www.polkatheatre.com/editorial/arts-access



Autism in Venues

What is Autism?

No person on the autistic spectrum is the same, but the condition is characterised by a triad of impairments, which affect:

- Imagination
- Communication
- Interaction

People with autism often suffer from sensory challenges; acute hearing, or sensitivity to light, which can be an intense source of discomfort in, for example, a theatre. However, with regular contact and practise, this discomfort can be desensitised over time. People with autism can also make involuntary noises and this has led to complaints in venues from other members of the audience. The dilemma then becomes who should be moved, or who should be made to leave, the audience member making the noise or the person making the complaint?

On the 10th of October 2010, a conference was held at the Unicorn Theatre, in which ACA was a partnership organisation. “Autism and Theatre”, was an Industry Inspiration Day that examined just these issues. A year on, and much progress has been made, although there is still a lot to do. Theatres in the West End and increasingly, cinemas, have adopted a strategy of providing “Autism-friendly” and “Relaxed” performances to include and cater for people with autism and people with disabilities.

This development has enhanced access strategies, and provided training and understanding about the condition where there was none before. A certain degree of acceptance has now been established, and families are increasingly motivated by this to start regularly coming to theatre, allowing it to play a more prominent role in the life of their autistic child.

There is also a growing need for shows to start reflecting the lives of children with autism, or children with disabilities, either in their content or by promoting the work of theatre makers and artists who live with the condition. Whilst it is difficult to imagine a story that would be a “one-size fits all”, children need to have more opportunities to see positive disabled role models and their own lives reflected in productions on stage. For more information on autism, or access in theatres, see the websites below.

www.autism.org.uk

www.unicorntheatre.com

www.soltma.co.uk

To read a report of the Autism and Theatre Conference please visit: www.solt.co.uk/autism-theatre

Publishing: A more Inclusive approach

Bookstart is a scheme run by the Booktrust organisation, dedicated to fostering a love of literacy and reading by issuing free books for children and babies. In the past, the book world has produced niche books for a specifically disabled audience that were patronising and out of touch. Consultant for Disability Issues, Alexandra Strick's remit is to ensure that Booktrust operates in a more accessible way by making their services more disability aware. They do this by providing a service that is orientated with a disabled audience in mind: considering how they might access a story without compromising on content or quality. They also offer a far broader range of books that gives their readership genuine choice.



Booktrust work with publishers to issue books that:

- Promote positive images and messages of disability.
- Have multi-sensory resources that accompany the books for different impairments.
- Include raised pictures for people who are visually impaired.
- Specialise in writing books for children with a low-reading age and with dyslexia, such as integrated touch 'n feel books for Year 7's.
- Consult with disabled / children over the types of books they publish and produce.

www.booktrust.org.uk

Epic Arts: Celebrating Differences

Epic Arts is a charity that works both nationally and internationally with disabled and non-disabled people, promoting inclusivity. It uses the arts as a tool for bringing people together and celebrating their creative potential.

“Celebrating Differences”, was a project that brought 20 SEN children and 30 students from neighbouring primary schools together for a week-long project of art, music and drama. Far from being a one-off event, a key element to this project was to create a legacy of inclusivity and community between these two parallel schools. The project was about instigating a policy of Inclusivity, bringing together disabled children and nondisabled children, with the intention that they learn about each other, whilst having fun.

Key successes of this project were cited as:

- Preparing Teaching Assistants and support staff in advance meant their buy-in to the project was assured. This was crucial in leading to a more meaningful engagement with the SEN children, through their support workers.
- A new community and a loss of labels. It was no longer important who was disabled, who was not. Children were empowered and encouraged to see past disability and work inclusively.
- An on-going dialogue and legacy between the two schools.

For more information about Epic Arts work go to:
www.epicarts.org.uk



Access in Museums

Discover is a hands-on story museum in Stratford dedicated to children's speaking, reading and writing. Community and Education Officer Zoe Kilb, spoke about how Discover already works in a multisensory and imaginative way. However, encouraging the local community that Discover is an accessible and disability-friendly venue, has been a challenge to the organisation.

The Mighty Mega Saturday Club was set up as an SEN club, dedicated to giving disabled children the chance to be creative and have fun. As a weekly event it is a reliable bridge in encouraging disabled children and their families to come regularly to Discover, to feel that they are a welcome, and a valued part of the community. The legacy of this is that disabled children and their families have gradually felt more confident in coming to Discover and participating in the workshops and events outside the The Mighty Mega Saturday Club.

The club is free to everyone and works on projects that continue to have a legacy within Discover i.e. decorating the storytelling yurt that Discover takes to festivals, and building installations that live in the museum.

www.discover.org.uk



Panel Discussion

Q. Is “Disabled theatre” a term that we should start to re-assess? Surely theatre should be more integrated? Targeted performances such as “autism-friendly” and “relaxed” are fine, but only part of a journey towards inclusivity in theatre. What are the next steps?

A. It’s important to be explicit when talking about disability, that you are discussing people on a spectrum from PMLD (Profound Multiple Learning Difficulties) to those who are highly functioning, where a disability is not even apparent. Inclusivity and integration are part of a journey and all too often it is done for the benefit of disabled children alone rather than working towards the bigger picture of getting society to re-evaluate its perceptions of disabled people and disabled artists. This is much easier to do when working with children who ask normalising questions for example, “why does he have a breathing tube?” vs. “what’s wrong with him?”

Getting it wrong and learning how to go about things in a better way is all part of that journey, and we shouldn’t be afraid to make mistakes.

Consultation with the disabled community should always be part of an approach in moving forwards. That has been a key part of good practice in all organisations represented.

Q. How do we ensure that we are moving forward with inclusive training? How many arts training establishments are physically accessible? How many of them take on disabled students?

A. Encouragingly the answer is in the room. We educate. There are increasingly Community Arts Practices that all contribute to training and working with the disabled community. Today at this conference there are two delegations of students, who are young people themselves, one from the Brit School and the other from East15 Acting School, both learning about working in practical ways to provide training opportunities within the community.

Architecture & Access

Mind the Gap, is an award-winning theatre company that works with disabled and non-disabled artists as equals. In 2008-9, Mind the Gap, moved into a new purpose-built space in Lister Mills an old silk factory. The project took seven years to complete and the company consulted the disabled community at every step of the way. Tim Wheeler, the company's artistic director described the approach as "a theatre designing process." Whilst it is an on-going challenge for any building to be truly accessible, the following points outline Mind the Gap's approach in both design and technology towards creating the right space for disabled artists:

- **Equitable use of entrances.** The idea that every entrance in and out of the building is the same for a disabled person, as a non-disabled person .i.e. Disabled entrances aren't hidden around the back of the building, or further away than other entrances.
- **Flexibility of walls.** Allowing flexibility in regard to room size and shape.
- **Simple and intuitive design and technology** that allows for changing situations and crucially, is easy to use.
- **Clear information for users with different needs in regards to control.** e.g. A box for lighting controls operated by labels that are also raised, and created in Braille.
- **An inbuilt tolerance for error in the technology.**



Magpie Dance

Magpie Dance is an inclusive contemporary dance company for learning disabled people, asking questions about who can be an artist, a choreographer, a dancer, and creating opportunities for participation, performance and training.

“The Ed Effect”, was an adaptation of the story of “Edward Scissorhands”, and a collaboration with Matthew Bourne's, “New Adventures at Big Dance”, at the Churchill Theatre, in July 2012. It was a fantastic showcase of Magpie's nurtured talent.

See the website below for more details:

www.magpiedance.org.uk/

Kinaesthetic engagement: “Theatre for Impossible audiences”

Oily Cart has developed innovative, multi-sensory and highly interactive productions for the very young and for young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Looking at how they might address and engage with non-verbal children with cognitive impairments, they started to work with the kinaesthetic sense; a more tactile, sensory and interactive approach.

Oily Cart has gone on to make more sustained work that includes an embedding of character into school environments, bringing a character and their home onto the school site. Challenging the notion of a show being 90 minutes, Oily Cart shows can go on all day, all week, or potentially all term, engaging with children slowly in their own time, rather than for solely the duration of the show.

Film clips of previous shows that Tim Webb, their Artistic Director shared with us can be found on:

www.oilycart.org.uk/early_years/previous/

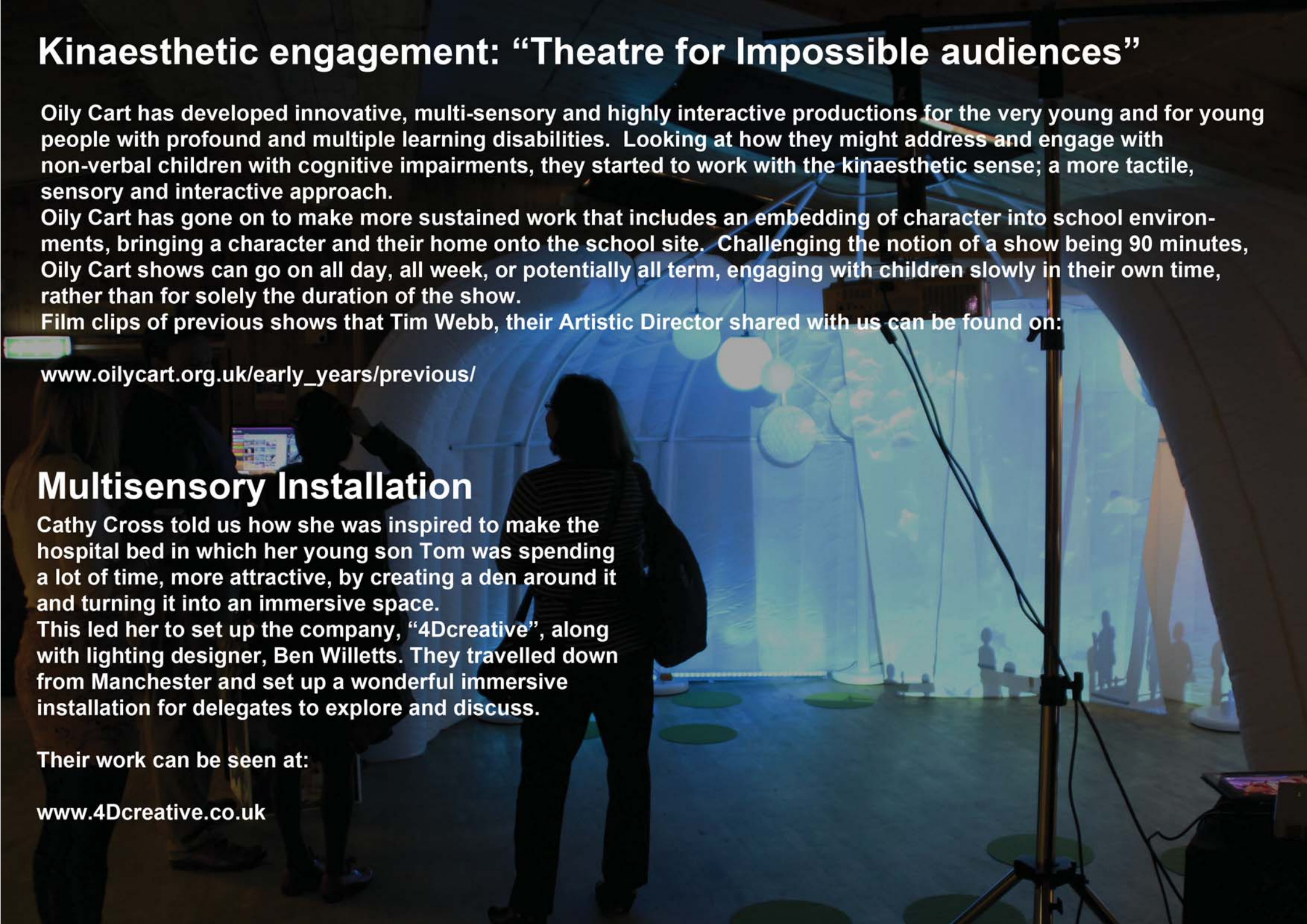
Multisensory Installation

Cathy Cross told us how she was inspired to make the hospital bed in which her young son Tom was spending a lot of time, more attractive, by creating a den around it and turning it into an immersive space.

This led her to set up the company, “4Dcreative”, along with lighting designer, Ben Willetts. They travelled down from Manchester and set up a wonderful immersive installation for delegates to explore and discuss.

Their work can be seen at:

www.4Dcreative.co.uk



Disabled Artists In Conversation

Daryl Beeton and Amit Sharma discussed the current challenges and the future for Disabled artists, post Paralympics fever. Both artists worked upon the opening and closing ceremonies. Daryl is the Artistic Director of KazzumTheatre and Amit is the Associate Director of Graeae Theatre.

Both artists talked about the pros and cons of using disabled performers in performances and of the label, “disability arts.” On the one hand it is exclusive and can have negative connotations but on the other, it can actively promote disability, be inspiring and be appreciated as great theatre in its own right.

The Paralympics opening and closing ceremonies are just such an example, giving great profile to disabled artists and creating a sensational energy in the sector. Yet there is a frustration felt by artists who have been working for years before these events. So how do we maintain that momentum? Is it through education and training, better funding and making sure we provide opportunities for the next generation of disabled artists?

There is also a danger that one of the legacies of the Paralympics will foster a two-tier attitude towards disability; that some disabled people are superhuman and others are incapable, or scroungers etc, which is damaging. Whilst there is a current groundswell, it is time for mainstream venues to start working with disabled artists, so audiences become used to seeing them onstage. In a recent conference in September 2012, organised by the Kennedy Centre in Washington, the UK was highlighted as leading the way in working with disabled artists and making work for disabled audiences. There is a lot of potential here, and there is a bright future.

Daryl also introduced the film TYA UK (Theatre for Young Audiences UK) created of their Disability Day of workshops and talks at the ASSITEJ World Congress 2012, in Malmö, Sweden. This film can be seen on the TYA’s website below and was funded with financial help from the Arts Council England.

Leading Questions & Recommendations for the Day

We hope that this debate and the thinking and sharing that was done around these issues will continue. ACA welcomes the opportunity to discuss this further and are happy to act as a bridge to approaching any of the speakers at the Inspiration Day.

What opportunities are big arts organisations providing for disabled artists now?

What are Drama Schools, Conservatories and arts colleges doing to meet the access requirements for disabled students?

What can we learn from children about successful integration with Young People and adults?

Future Events

Next Inspiration Day: Children's Film in partnership with BFI Londonderry NI 2013

Other Disability / Access Events

Relaxed Performance Project – a partnership between SOLT/TMA and the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts, helping a portfolio of theatres (Royal Shakespeare Company, National Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Shakespeares Globe plus more) to programme a relaxed performance – leading to a conference in June 2013 where a 'How To' toolkit and 'Relaxed Performance' Logo will be shared.

Advice

If you would like advice or counsel on any issues regarding Disability or Access for your organisation please have a look at the information below.

Captioning

Stagetext contact General Manager Lissy Lovett lissy@stagetext.org

BSL interpreters

Polka Theatre contact Access Officer Lucia Simmons Lucia@polkatheatre.com

Theatresign contact Terry Ruane enquiry@theatresign.com

Consultation and Training around Access

Shape Arts www.shapearts.org.uk

Mencap www.mencap.org.uk

National Autistic Society www.autism.org.uk

Glossary of Terms

SEN – Special Educational Needs

BSL – British Sign Language

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorder

PMLD – Profound Multiple Learning Difficulties

Organisations

ACA - Action for Children's Arts

TYA - Theatre for Young Audiences

ASSITEJ - International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People

SOLT - Society of London Theatres

TMA - Theatre Managers Association

ACE - Arts Council England