

DEVELOPING YOUR ONLINE OUTREACH

Friday 21 August 2020
hosted by Action for Children's Arts

www.childrensarts.org.uk

PRESENTERS

Vicky Ireland MBE – Chair of Action for Children's Arts. Freelance director, writer, actress, presenter, Co-Artistic Director of A Thousand Cranes Theatre. Former Artistic Director of Polka Theatre Wimbledon.

Jacqueline Malcolm – ACA Trustee. Playwright, Director, Author, Radio Presenter & Producer, Theatre Reviewer and Strategist.

SPEAKERS

Matthew Crowfoot – Accessibility Consultant, ACA Critical Friend.

Samantha Giblin – Artistic Director, Little Actor's Theatre Company.

Michael Judge – Associate Director, NIE Theatre.

Introductions

Jacqueline founded the Creative Platform Academy, which includes a workshop designed to be delivered online. This was created pre-Covid in order to reach a more global audience. For creatives, the idea of transferring our work from the physical space to online is really exciting. It is a moment in time that we won't regret if we grasp it. It gives the audience time to see lots of things they might normally get around to watching.

Provocations

Samantha Giblin

Little Actors works in the community with children, predominantly on the North-West border with Wales. We also have a centre in London. We work with professional actors in the room with children and young people to perform, create, devise etc. I am going to use today's session to demonstrate how we went online.

13 March: we have a dress rehearsal.

15 March: we had a production with our Youth Theatre with a live audience.

16 March: Boris Johnson announces that over 70s need to stay at home. We also work with over 50s so our adult groups had to close down.

17 March: I cancelled our adult sessions.

18 March: we had our last session with youth groups – although schools were still open we knew closure was coming the following week.

March is the end of our financial year and our income immediately went to zero. Our grants had ended, we had delivered our projects. Initially, I planned to tidy up our accounts, however we had bills to pay with no income. Not long after, my local councils opened up grant opportunities and we also had a successful ACE survival grant bid.

We then felt obliged to deliver work online. We believe that everybody should be paid properly, however some of my actors offered to volunteer their time. Initially we set up some Zoom workshops with people donating their time, but we then developed a programme of work involving improv, comedy skills, writing and masterclasses. The weekly workshops became accumulative and we now have work by the children that we are trying to get published.

We merged our London and North-west youth theatres, as well as welcoming new members from other parts of the UK. A group of students wrote a play about their teenage Covid experience, which we filmed using Zoom. We have been learning on the go all the time.

WiFi dependence is a big issue, but we all accepted there would be errors and issues and that was OK.

On the subject of making it financially viable, we were able to offer all of this for free thanks to funding from ACE. We would like to keep this work going in future, but it is just as expensive online as it is face-to-face because of safeguarding etc. It is not a cheaper option. That said, it was really rewarding for us and the children – and we loved how creative they were with it.

Michael Judge

NIE is a theatre company that thrives on the liveness of theatre and the complicity between actors on stage and the audience. We hate not being able to perform live, but perhaps there is an opportunity to extend reach online. A provocation for us at the moment is 'Is it better to perform live, or to pre-record?'

We shared a past show online, which was two hours long. On reflection, it was too long to watch online. We promoted it as a two-week only show, however there is a lot of content online. We are trying to work out what is unique about our work and how to distinguish between theatre as an art-form and other content you see on screen. We can't compete with Netflix for example.

Tales from the Edge of Town was a co-created project. We were about to put on a live show when lockdown happened, so we had to recover and take the time to work out the best way to progress the project. We held onto the co-creation element, inviting people to participate and contribute. We thought about using the aesthetic of being on a screen; we had permission to use footage with the children taking part; we considered the duration of the piece and how to make it manageable; we distributed through local networks but also physically through food hubs and creativity packs for those who can't get online.

We took the project into schools via Zoom and were able to get feedback, facilitated by a teacher. Some of the children weren't in the UK, which was exciting – the potential to reach a different audience. That worked because we had an existing partnership with the school. Schools were keen to have content that wasn't standard online-learning resources.

Matthew Crowfoot

Accessibility is now one of the most important things that can be considered. Not just because we are in a time where the whole world is looking to shelter, but also because quite a lot of our Deaf and Disabled communities are still in hiding. They have suffered a return to the idea that we have pushed away over the last twenty years – we have worked to bring those people into our communities, but thanks to Covid-19 those shielding are being asked to remain out of sight. It does

mean that we are not seeing members of these communities. Technology is an incredible leveller as well as being a disadvantage.

For those in the deaf and disabled communities that use computers, they have been given access in a way we have never known before. For example, a visually impaired person can now interact in group conversations without the difficulties of navigating to a venue. It means we can work with colleagues spread out across the country. Someone with a fatiguing health condition who can't commute long distances can now interact in a virtual space from their home.

Children reliant on engaging with sensory workshops can't. We have this split world with some great pros and devastating cons. There are many ways we can support different needs – the key aspect to that is ensuring that you have given yourself enough time to ensure what you produce online has had some thought about accessibility alongside it. That means every budget includes time and money spent on making sure work is digitally accessible.

If you are producing a video, are you captioning it? Is dialogue captioned? This is what allows somebody with a hearing impairment to engage. Furthermore, embedded transcripts are searchable, allowing people to find certain pieces of text and translate them into a different language. If you are adding content to Vimeo or YouTube, they both have practical tools to help you caption your video for free. They also have algorithms that will do it for you although they can be problematic. You can also create a second video with audio description.

If you have a website, you should also have an accessibility page – including a link to communicate with somebody in the organisation and ask for help if you can't access all the material available.

Alongside any video, I would also recommend producing some information to help anybody who is neuro-divergent and may require some support. If you are doing a workshop, that may include sensory objects. Do you want paper audience-members can crinkle, or a small glass of water they can touch? They are tiny things, but a little companion pack alongside the video or event allows accessibility to be wider and engage with more people.

Video conferencing (Zoom) is great because you can record it and caption afterwards. There are companies that will do live captioning but this is expensive. Two platforms use the AI algorithm: Google Meet and Microsoft Teams. Both Google and Microsoft have heavily invested in accessible technology.

Easy-read websites are simple to make and not new – just make sure not to use dense language. This helps those with learning disabilities and BSL users. Ensure everything has headers and formulaic headings. This allows easy navigation for users and screen-readers.

The intersect is becoming increasingly meshed together – by prioritising accessibility you are helping multiple groups to find access your content.

Technology can help as much as it can hinder. We need to be champions of using it correctly, investing time and extra work to go alongside the great work everyone is creating so that everyone can access it.

BREAKOUT ROOMS

Group 1

We were talking about showcasing our work to children and the feedback we get from it. Children are under so much pressure from exams and need the work from creatives to allow them to have fun.

We ended with the concept that wherever you are (city or rural), learning is everywhere. Using the community as a campus for learning in and with theatres, museums and galleries – talking about all art forms, not just theatre. Very interested in getting people physically back too.

Group 2

We followed on about accessibility with Matthew and the need for a page which talks about your accessibility offers, linking through to the venues where you work.

We talked about a social stories pack – a document to assist people in navigating the physical environment and any artwork created. All in pictorial form and easy to read text. This is commonly used in TYA and dance work, and is now being used in the wider arts world including museums and galleries. It allows someone to prepare themselves for the art before they participate.

We also talked about which art forms suit digital and which don't. Ian's puppet work has really flourished with lockdown – had over a quarter of a million views for his show, which was designed over WhatsApp/Zoom/Skype and filmed on an iPhone. Dance however isn't so well suited to film, requiring a different set of skills.

Subtitling and editing in Welsh is very challenging.

Group 3

We talked a lot about how to make live theatre work with bubbles – the main focus was on a return to live work, rather than continuing to work online.

One participant is thinking of offering schools a live performance with smaller audiences. For example, at one school there will be three 15 minute performances for different groups.

We've had to accept we can't directly interact with children. Companies are working on one-hander shows for Christmas. This is affordable for schools.

Q&A session

Vicky – does anybody have problems with insurance? Safeguarding?

Samantha – we adapted consent forms for working in the Zoom format. Parents were allowed to be there. The younger the children were, the more likely parents were to be there. We also had two actors there for safeguarding so no one adult was alone with the children.

Penny – the opposite. There was a creative opportunity for a whole group of creatives from all sectors, working with local schools and head teachers, especially vulnerable children and young people's gatekeepers. We gave iPads to those families without access to digital, using emergency funds. It has given us new models of working that are better than what we had before.