

**EMBEDDING DIVERSITY
INTO YOUR WORKING PRACTICES**

Tuesday 4 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.

Chris Jarvis – Trustee of Action for Children's Arts. Presenter on BBC Children's Television.

SPEAKERS

Ellie Griffiths – Artistic Director, Oily Cart.

Phoebe Kemp – actor and Chair of Equity Deaf and Disabled Committee.

Lily Ash Sakula – trans non-binary artist, animator and educator.

Emmerson Sutton - Youth Independent Advisory Group Member, Advisor to the Young Mayor of Lewisham.

ATTENDEES

Adam Annand – Associate Director, London Bubble Theatre.

Sarah Argent – Artistic Associate, Theatr Iolo.

Andrew Baker – Wild Geese Theatre Company.

Janna Balham – ACA Trustee, therapist and child counsellor.

Anna Comino-James – Trustee of the Potential Trust.

Dr Gill Brigg – freelance theatre-maker and special school teacher.

Mimi Doulton – Development Officer, ACA.

Lyle Fulton – Production Manager, Wild Geese Theatre Company.

Anna Ganley – Head of Staff, Society of Authors.

Dr Penny Hay FRSA FHEA – Artistic Director, 5x5x5=Creativity

Kevin Lewis – performer, writer, director of theatre for children and young people.

Jacqueline Malcolm – ACA Trustee, playwright, director, author, radio presenter, theatre reviewer.

Ian Nicholson – freelance theatre director.

Erika Poole – actress, disability champion.

Lisa Prime – Programme Manager for Children and Young People, BAFTA.

Annie Rowe – CDG Casting Director, writer.

Matthew Sanders – Artistic Director, Magic Lantern.

Sophie Turner – Sophie Tea Creative Arts.

Vince Virr – freelance performer, deviser, collaborator, choreographer and educator.

Carys Wehden – Production and Administration Assistant, Theatr na nÓg.

Susan Whiddington – ACA Trustee, Director of Mousetrap Theatre Projects.

Introductions

Today is all about asking questions and learning. Diversity is a huge topic – we will only cover the tip of the iceberg today. In children's arts we are passionate about inclusivity and representation, but we can always do more to break down the barriers. There is a lot of collective wisdom in this group, so I hope we will collect some ideas from you today that ACA can pick up and run with.

Provocations

Ellie Griffiths

We start every creative process with the idea of rich inclusion. Rather than thinking about the show we want to create, we think about people with the most barriers to access – particularly those with complex needs or profound and multiple disabilities. We start there and are always looking for shared points of interest between the artists and those audiences. The theory is that if you start by making something for people with the most barriers, you should then be creating something that can branch out and cover the diverse needs of all of those in society.

In practice, it's really hard to create a show that holds everybody's needs in one space – especially as some people's needs will conflict. If you can't create a show for everyone, you can create shows in different formats. We always ask who are we still excluding at the beginning of every project. Then we can prioritise them in the next show.

Every structure needs to be questioned if you want to be meaningfully inclusive. Interrogate *all* the structures – sometimes being in a theatre isn't an accessible structure to begin with. Scheduling creates lots of barriers – question the structures of your rehearsals. Think about verbal bias – think about people who don't communicate with language and all the possibilities that creates.

There isn't one show that won't present any barriers to anyone, but your shows can always be intersectional. That means thinking about whose story you are telling, who are the performers and artists in the room. Inclusivity has to be on every level. Don't make any assumptions and invite as many different perspectives into the room. Don't get defensive when people tell you that you're getting it wrong – if you're not asking the questions above then you are excluding someone.

Phoebe Kemp

I am a disabled actor and theatre-maker, my other hat is being chair of the Deaf and Disabled members' committee with Equity.

I worked with Oily Cart on their last show as a creative enabler – my job was to provide access for the audience. I worked with actors in rehearsals, talking about how they could interact with people who have autism, hearing impairments, visual impairments etc. When we arrived at venues, I worked with ushers to set up a quiet room, which is a crucial part of inclusion – creating a space that feels safe for everybody. The show we created, *All Wrapped Up* included a mix of neurotypical children in the audience. We needed to create a space where everyone felt comfortable and engaged. The show toured for three months, and ended up having two different versions that were safe for different groups.

I am often one of the first physically disabled people a company may have worked with. I am currently working with Equity to create a guide for disabled workers in our industry. People are too scared to even know what to ask or offer disabled artists.

I am passionate about arts and activism – the disability arts and activism movement have always been intertwined. Our slogan is ‘Nothing about us without us’. I am passionate about disabled voices being in the room especially when we are working with disabled audiences. Non-verbal audience members are most frequently the voices left out of planning conversations. Furthermore, the sensory theatre world is often quite able-bodied and has the same problems with race as the rest of theatre.

It’s really important for audiences to see themselves represented. We had one audience member who tweeted because she felt so passionate about her daughter being able to see somebody performing in a wheelchair. It is transformative for children to see people on stage like them. Even now, I don’t get to see people like me on the stage and screens.

People think about access as dull and expensive, something you have to do. But it can be really exciting, interesting, creative and fun to go into a space and imagine how you would interact with it if you couldn’t see a space. As an audience member, I am bored of seeing stories about cis, white, able-bodied men. We have seen that story thousands of times. There are so many more exciting stories out there and I think it’s really important that the people those stories are about are part of telling them.

Lily Ash Sakula

I’m an artist, animator and live in Deptford. Vicky asked me to come and talk about a film I recently made in a SEND school – I was doing a residency working with children with multiple complex needs aged 5-18. It was a new experience for me. I had worked one-to-one in various settings but hadn’t worked in big groups. It was a very exciting new experience and taught me a lot about teaching in a way that is inclusive and accessible.

The idea that you need to question everything from the ground up really rings true to me. As an able-bodied person coming into the space of a SEND school there was so much I didn’t know. One of the most important places to begin is finding a shared interest and building the experience of empathy. When I arrived at the school, I showed them a film I made about my experience as a trans person in the world, which explored the experience of being simultaneously hyper-visible but also invisible. This rang true with a lot of these kids. They said it is what it feels like to be in a wheelchair – people stare but don’t see you as a person. It was great to find a shared experience.

Something I encouraged from the beginning was that people made their mobility aids part of the animation, so that they could see their characters move as they did. I recorded a lot of children speaking, sometimes using iPads if they were non-verbal. Hearing their voices and opinions was really important to make it not a film about them, but a film by them. They are artists, not subjects.

The other important learning for me was about creating a space that is process-driven and sensory. I tried to create physical experiences for the children to have. The chance to sit in the space even if they didn’t want to make something. We did a lot of touching, moving, dancing – it didn’t end up in the film but created an atmosphere where we felt safe together. The music in the film was fully composed and performed by the young people in collaboration with an amazing music teacher in the school.

Emmerson Sutton

I'm 13 years-old and I live in Lewisham. I have many roles: I have been in BBC Newsround, am a BBC representative, was a presenter on last year's JM Barrie Awards, have done the Bronze Music Award. These opportunities wouldn't have existed if people didn't see the potential in me.

I've come to talk about opportunity because I feel opportunity is what gives people purpose and meaning. It helps people to be successful. Vicky asking me to speak at last year's JMB was a gamble and a risk – we didn't know each other, but you always have to take risks because without measured risks you won't be able to achieve true inclusivity.

I was on BBC News recently promoting Black Lives Matter – an important campaign that we all need to understand and be educated on. I don't think anyone would say that they are racist, but we all need to be educated to be able to say that we are anti-racist.

Recently I have been working with the police's Youth Independent Advisory Group – we are able to tackle certain agendas and projects to make Lewisham a better borough. I am also the first person from the UK to work abroad with the Louis Armstrong Jazz Group. They educate young people on creating better music. It was really fun to experience this and experience another culture online.

I have been working with BAFTA who have given me amazing opportunities. The reason I mention opportunity so much is because it has got me where I am today. I want more grass-roots children and young people to be promoted to success. So many people fall through the cracks, not everyone has the wherewithal to strive for success alone. People need help and encouragement – I needed that too at one point. I am here because people saw my potential.

BREAKOUT ROOMS

Room 1

Vicky, Lisa, Kevin, Matthew, Lily: one of the things that kept cropping up was the content of our work – who is it for? Is it as accessible as we can make it? What adjustments do we need to make? We discussed Place2Be and their work with BAFTA, plus the link through to BFI who have standards for accessible content.

We also agreed that we are dipping our toes into this subject. We need more meetings on individual sorts of diversity to really explore this idea properly.

Room 2

Chris, Carys, Andrew, Emmerson: we were talking about the restrictions sometimes experienced at relaxed performances – how do we engage the audience and still give them a same/similar experience to the full show, rather than something watered down? In pantomime, relaxed performances are still in their infancy. It's good they are happening but more guidance is needed.

Emmerson talked about why Hamilton was brilliant as it showed a diversity of personalities, not just racial stereotypes. We need to keep questioning what we are doing, breaking barriers of racism and access.

Room 3

Jacqueline, Gill, Phoebe, Penny, Ian: We can't sit back and wait for the Arts Council to tell us how to do this. We need to stop finding projects and making people fit them, but find the people first and then create the project together.

We all want cultural diversity and to see everyone included. If the will is there, nothing should stop us from achieving that.

We talked a lot about institutions including universities and theatres. This might be the disconnect between grand aims and work done on the ground. 'Radiant intention' - making sure vision is in day-to-day actions.

Is Covid-19 an opportunity for change?

Room 4

Ellie, Adam, Anna, Vince: we talked a lot about the move to digital, which has provided a route into theatre for some, particularly those aged 16-25. However, it has shut out maybe an even larger group who don't have digital access.

Inclusivity is still skirted over, it still isn't addressed across the board. How long is it before these opportunities, BSL interpreters etc. are just there without people asking?

We talked about young people with extremely high learning potential but communication or disability barriers. The communication used in a setting can disable someone. Rather than finding a way to enable young people to communicate in a setting, how can the setting open up to them? Do we have to just judge people by their use of English, as in parliament?

Room 5

Lyle, Susan, Erica, Anna, Sophie, Sarah: We were so taken by Emmerson's speech – opportunity became a huge part of our conversation. Panels have been non-representative for a long time. This is an issue that people often realise at the last minute when it is too late. When we go into schools to speak, we need to have representative panels.

Sarah discussed experiences at Festivals – diversity in children's arts has started to go backwards. It is our duty to move things forwards again. This is very linked to the education of operators in the industry.

We need to shift the rhetoric so that when people set up companies they have less of a tunnel vision outlook and more awareness of where we want the sector to be. We might then create an industry that everyone can access and be proud of.

Q&A Session

Q. Lisa – I would like to ask some of the companies present whether gender identity is a big part of the work you are doing now? It is something we are looking at in our work at BAFTA.

A. Ellie – it's something we have definitely been thinking about. We have talked a lot about access, but children's theatre is really gendered. It makes it feel less relevant to the conversations young people are having amongst themselves. I feel we have a lot of work to do to invite those perspectives into our rehearsal rooms.

A. Lily – I am trans and non-binary. I find that when I work with young people, there is very often a child there who is trans or questioning. It gives them an opportunity they might not have had to say so. It is an easy, but huge thing that we can do.

Q. Is there anything in particular that makes you go ‘ouch’?

A. Emmerson – with children there is a negative aspect around homosexuality, which we need to break down. This needs to be dealt with quickly. We need to be educated and be able to educate people around the stigma of this.

A. Sarah – TIE used to be at the forefront of representation in terms of race, gender stereotyping, disability. We really need to look at what has happened – this used to be the place where you could see real representation on stage.

A. Ellie – most of the work I see is early years. People choose shows with performers who make them feel safe: white, women, feminine and maternal. In these subtle ways you start to notice this gendering is there from a very early age.

A. Phoebe – in my experience, people feel you can’t be multiple minorities. You can’t be disabled and bisexual, people dismiss it as unrealistic. However, people can exist in a space as an ‘other’ without the show being about that one thing. Children’s author and the government have not helped the issue of trans rights. We need people working in children’s theatre to say they are supportive.

A. Penny – the value of the arts is it allows you to try out different versions of yourself.

A. Emmerson – when you look back on old English theatre productions you see that women are certain stereotypes, and men are too. Every group has a set of adjectives and I feel that is strongly rooted in theatre today. We need to be able to discuss this, get rid of it, move past it without people complaining that it’s not like the old days. We need to all be able to say ‘I want to be just like them’, which means seeing people like us.

A. Vicky – theatre makers of the UK for young people should be incredibly proud. We have the fiercest history in the world of being inclusive. I hear the danger that so much of what we fought for is being lost.

A. Mimi – arts education is no longer available to anyone except posh, white kids.

A. Adam – people who didn’t have structural wealth in their families used to be able to make a career in theatre. For ten years I worked on a salary as an actor teacher and had six weeks holiday a year. For someone of my class, working as an actor would have been a difficult job without the security of employment. I would have left the industry without that job. We need ways for people to be salaried and live secure lives as artists. My big shout out is for Universal Basic Income.