

INCLUSIVE THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

Danny Braverman



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UK Centre of ASSITEJ

Inclusive Theatre for Young Audiences

If not now...

Something remarkable has been happening in theatre in the UK, but barely registering a blip on the radar. Let's call it Inclusive Theatre for Young Audiences (Inclusive TYA) for now - perhaps a better term will emerge later. The lack of proper recognition for this work should come as no surprise. Firstly, the work is for children and young people: a Cinderella sector that is often denigrated as the first rung on the career ladder or, conversely, a career cul de sac. Then, the work is about disability, so it's easily dismissed as worthy: an instrument of social change lacking the "excellence" of the mainstream or the "innovation" of experimental work. But a closer look reveals that not only is Inclusive TYA exciting and innovative, it's also an area where the UK is leading the world.

So, what can be done to shine a light on this area of excellence? How can future artists be inspired? How can it reach bigger audiences? What international connections can be made? And how can we be ambitious about it in Austerity Britain?

How this report has come about?

This report was commissioned by TYA-UK as a result of the work of a voluntary steering group, chaired by Daryl

Beeton of Kazzum and produced by Vicky Ireland of TYA UK, that produced the *Whose Theatre Is It Anyway?* day at the ASSITEJ 2011 Festival in Copenhagen/Malmö. The steering group, supported by an Arts Council Grants for the Arts award, spent a year putting together presentations and workshops to engage TYA colleagues from across the globe with the potential for inclusive work.

The steering group, however, asked me to write a complementary report that reviewed the strategic importance of Inclusive TYA and looked to the future. The aims of this report, then, are to comment from a UK perspective and to raise key issues so that we can build on successes and develop Inclusive TYA from a position of strength, both in the UK and globally.

What is Inclusive TYA?

Let's start with definition. The artists and companies involved don't share a common language. Some define themselves as "interactive", "integrated" or "accessible"; others use terms like "disabled-led" or "disability arts" or talk about "unlocking authentic voices". The words "unusual" and "multi-sensory" also appear a fair bit. As a way then of finding a term that embraces this range of work I'm using the term inclusive to recognise a shared ethos. What Inclusive Theatre practitioners have in common is support for a rights-based approach to

disability. Inclusive Theatre recognises the centrality of removing the physical and attitudinal barriers that society puts up. This way of working contrasts with a medical model; this is not about conditions that need curing, but about trying to remove the "stairs" and "stares" that prevent equal participation in society.

I am also concentrating attention on work for young audiences. Over the last forty years, work for young audiences in the UK has been fertile ground for a great deal of artistically pioneering and socially engaged theatre. Equalities have been an abiding concern and UK TYA companies such as Theatre Centre, Half Moon Young People's Theatre, Red Ladder and Nottingham Roundabout started exploring disability as an issue in their work over twenty years ago. In an ad hoc way this work has quietly developed; artists have matured, developed their practice and inspired the next generation.

As it stands now in 2012, Inclusive TYA takes many forms. At the heart of the work is the involvement of disabled artists and/or engagement with disabled young people. Typically Inclusive Theatre practitioners will see access issues as positive creative stimuli and not, as is frequent elsewhere, a nuisance, funding requirement or budgetary burden. This approach to access takes many forms, for example by integrating sign language and audio description in imaginative ways, or by creating multi-sensory environments.



Photo Credit: Kazzum

Why is Inclusive Theatre for Young Audiences needed?

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says:

“Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”

We know that this right is denied to many children all over the world. Indeed many children in the UK, despite our comparative wealth, still face significant barriers to participating meaningfully in the arts. However, barriers to participation in the arts are significantly greater for disabled young people. We go back again to “stairs” and “stares”. You only need to put yourself in the shoes of a special school teacher trying to organise a trip to a local theatre to see why disabled children are far less likely to attend. It’s not just the cost that inhibits, think of the additional work attached to risk assessments, managing personal care, scoping physical access and liaising with parents ... and then there’s the parking.

Once you get to the theatre, of course, there’s no guarantee that staff and fellow audience members will appreciate your access needs. A recent case of a twelve year-old autistic boy, whose trip with his family to see *Wicked* in the West End was ruined, highlights some of the ways that disabled young

people can experience exclusion. A sound engineer drew attention to the young man’s involuntary noises and so set off a train of events that led to the family feeling humiliated, a flurry of media interest and, significantly, an Industry Inspiration Day at the Unicorn Theatre to discuss autism and theatre. The significance here is that TYA practitioners took the lead in addressing the issue; as is so often the case, and unrecognised, TYA is the engine of innovation waiting for the mainstream to catch up. Autism-friendly audience development projects have been embedded for some time at the Polka and Unicorn theatres and the more forward-looking mainstream theatres are now starting to adopt better practice in this area. The Industry Inspiration Day has now generated a report and some momentum across the theatre industry to make practical improvements to the theatre experience for autistic children.

This was not an access problem that could be solved by a lift, a ramp, a signer or an audio describer; shifting ingrained attitudes about who theatre is for is a more complex and profound project and one that should be front and centre of every theatre organisation’s business plan. It is interesting to challenge assumptions about who the default audience member is in the minds of theatre managements and therefore how norms of behaviour are defined. Those of us with experience of schools’ parties attending theatres are used to complaints from artists, staff and other audience members about “bad behaviour”. This usually falls into two categories – “inappropriate” reaction to

the show or distracting behaviour that has nothing to do with what’s on stage. In the first instance, it is interesting to contemplate how the complainers would react to the groundlings at the Globe who were anything but reverential through three hours of *King Lear*. In the second instance we should ask why theatres are producing shows that are boring paying customers.

Mainstream theatre, both publicly funded and commercial, has a range of schemes and measures that at their best are improving disabled people’s experiences, but at their worst are token efforts to remain compliant to legislation and to tick a box for the Arts Council. What Inclusive Theatre aims to do by contrast is to make sure that access is built-in, not bolted on. We need all theatre producers to consider the disabled young person as an audience member of equal status to everyone else in the community. One in seven children is considered to be disabled - do their cultural needs and rights get given the same consideration as their non-disabled peers, let alone adult audiences? Those that choose to go on the Inclusive Theatre journey will of course be driven by a passion for equality, but will also find it opens up ways of making theatre that will benefit all audiences of all ages; as with so much art, what can seem limiting is actually stimulating. As the *Wicked* incident shows, disabled young people still face daily exclusion. Many are still educated in segregated settings with low aspirations and those in mainstream often

experience exclusion within an integrated environment. Although there has been some improvement, there is still a lack of positive role models for disabled young people. From telethons to Bond films media depictions of “tragic and brave” or “sinister” disabled people still prevail. Our new age of austerity also brings with it a new stereotype for disabled people to encounter: disabled person as benefit scrounger. It is no wonder that disabled young people experience more anxiety and lack of self-esteem than their non-disabled peers.

For the disabled young person then, experiencing an Inclusive Theatre show can be life changing. With access at its heart, the show can meet young people on their own terms. So, for young people with communication impairments and learning difficulties, the narrative can be re-enforced visually as well as verbally; unusual audience responses can be embraced and be part of the rapport built between performer and audience; a sound picture can be carefully crafted for blind and visually-impaired young people; sign language integrated fully into the action for deaf audiences; and tactile and olfactory environments created for those with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The presence of professional disabled performers encourages an “I can do that” response and, of course, the stories and themes chosen will resonate with the disabled young person’s experience.

It’s also a mistake to think that Inclusive Theatre just benefits disabled children and young people. Increased disability awareness is essential for non-disabled young people too, challenging prejudice and discrimination and modeling a more inclusive world. Although parallels with race equality are often strained, in this case it’s worth reflecting on how changes in schools have had a lasting positive impact over the past thirty years. It is no longer contentious, as it once was, to give prominence to black writers in the curriculum, for example and TYA made a contribution to this shift towards a more culturally diverse educational experience for young people. White young people, as well as their Black and Asian peers, have clearly benefited from stereotyping being challenged in education.

My hope for the next generation is that Inclusive TYA can similarly contribute to greater empathy and understanding of difference with regard to disabled people in society.

HIJINX

THEATRE

Miss Brown to You

BY ALAN HARRIS
DIRECTED BY GAYNOR LOUGHER

Sent from the city to a small mid-Wales village, Emily struggles with loneliness and prejudice.

PG

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The scope of Inclusive Theatre for young audiences in the UK

The UK has a unique breadth and depth of Inclusive TYA. There are several TYA companies such as Bamboozle, Kazzum and Face Front where inclusion is a core value. Elsewhere, disability-focused companies working for adults and young people alike, such as Graeae and Mind the Gap and the Deaf-led theatre company Deafinitely, are making shows for children and young audiences. Hijinx, based in Cardiff, have their own long tradition of disability-focused work for community audiences of all ages and run an annual festival of Inclusive Theatre. Oily Cart, Bamboozle and Dragon Breath are amongst those creating multi-sensory pieces specifically for children and young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities: a strand of work that is particularly strong in the UK and unique globally. Many other TYA companies, including the Half Moon Young People's Theatre, Re-Play, Theatre Centre and M6 have a strong history of Inclusive Theatre work too. There is also an exceptionally strong strand of Inclusive Dance in the UK, with companies such as StopGAP, Amici, Candoco and Magpie regularly performing to young audiences. This list is of course not exhaustive, and I apologise to those I've omitted.

Graeae Theatre Company has made great strides in co-producing with regional producing theatres over the past ten years, including partnerships with Wolsey Theatre Ipswich, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Unicorn Theatre for Children and Birmingham Rep. In addition, they have developed a strong strand of outdoor performance. All this work is reaching young audiences and influencing mainstream UK Theatre.

Inclusive TYA is part of a fragile ecology, so despite the notable pockets of excellence the future is far from secure. There is patchy provision for disabled young people to participate in theatre projects, despite some good practice in youth theatres such as the Half Moon Young People's Theatre and Lancaster Dukes Playhouse. Projects such as the Orpheus Centre and StopGAP dance are providing performing arts training for young disabled adults, but drama schools, university theatre departments and FE colleges are, with notable exceptions, still generally weak at providing training for emerging disabled artists. A range of "applied theatre" courses has emerged in recent years, and they often offer students an opportunity to learn about Inclusive Theatre. However, these courses are mainly training non-disabled practitioners with skills as enablers and facilitators. We are now also seeing a new interest in MA courses specifically in Inclusive Theatre/Inclusive Arts.

It is clear that we are at a crucial time in the development of this work, with potential to make a step change in the next few years. Jenny Sealey of Graeae and Bradley Hemmings of Greenwich and Docklands Festival as co-Artistic Directors of the opening ceremony of the Paralympics have committed to significantly increasing the profile of disabled artists, as London will see the biggest gathering of disabled people that the world has ever seen this year.

The overall picture then is one where despite clear examples of excellence and innovation, there are lost opportunities to have a strategic approach to workforce

development and higher profile for Inclusive TYA. The task of encouraging this connectivity needs to be carefully considered. So far, it has not been taken up as a priority by existing young people's theatre and disability arts networks or fallen within the remit of any individual organisation.

Arts Council England has also recognised disability arts generally as an important priority:

"Disability equality is vital in achieving our aim of Great Art for Everyone. Ensuring that the arts are inclusive of and accessible to disabled people will, in turn, make the arts more accessible and have wider benefits for everyone. It will also ensure that disabled artists achieve the prominence they deserve within the arts community. In adopting the theme of prominence, our second Disability Equality Scheme seeks to raise the profile of disabled people and disability equality issues in the arts."

Alan Davey – Arts Council Disability Equality Scheme 2010-2013

There is clearly therefore an exceptionally strong case for major support for Inclusive TYA to move it to the next level. Making the case for increased investment will be a challenge in the current climate. However, the amount of funding required to make a major difference would be comparatively small, particularly in consideration of the impact that would be made not just for children, young people and the arts community in the UK, but also worldwide.

An international perspective on Inclusive TYA

Every three years ASSITEJ, the international organisation for theatre for young audiences, holds a festival and congress. In Adelaide in 2008 the UK made a bid to hold the event in London, with the newly built Unicorn Theatre for Children taking the lead. Although the bid was strong, particularly in its theme of celebrating diversity, it was rejected. Sweden and Denmark were selected to host the 2011 Festival and Congress, which was held jointly in the cities of Copenhagen and Malmö. However, as recognition of the strength of the UK bid, TYA-UK (Theatre for Young Audiences UK) was invited to present a feature day of discussions, workshops and presentations to explore the role of disabled people as artists and audience. When presented with this opportunity, Vicky Ireland (ex-Artistic Director of Polka Theatre) and Daryl Beeton (Artistic Director of Kazzum) from TYA-UK convened a working group to create a day of workshops, presentations and discussions. The group felt strongly that the “Whose Theatre Is It Anyway?” day should have an impact beyond the ASSITEJ Festival and Congress. The steering group wanted to use the occasion to reflect on current Inclusive TYA practice, build international connections and, most importantly, to build a platform for the future. They also recognised that the festival offered prospects beyond the day itself, as there would be opportunities at forums and fringe events to seek out future collaborators and find others with a shared passion.

In its vision statement, ASSITEJ says:

“ASSITEJ promotes cultural diversity, upholds cultural identity and actively advances the importance of a vibrant and inclusive cultural landscape for children and young people.”

However, despite this aspiration, the work of disabled artists and for disabled audiences has been largely absent.

As Daryl Beeton noted:

“This is the first time that Disability Arts for Children and Young People has been discussed and explored at any of the ASSITEJ International Festivals during the fifty years of the Association’s life. That it falls to TYA-UK to present this work is a great honour for us and recognition of good practice, one we wish to live up to.”

The “Whose Theatre Is It Anyway?” day despite offering a range of stimulating sessions did not attract much international interest. This in part was down to the remoteness of the venue and lack of dynamic promotion by the festival organisers. However, there was positive feedback from those who attended and a determination to build on the experience. It is worth noting that there was no evidence of any disabled artists contributing to this major international festival beyond the UK day, or that audiences of disabled children had been considered

at all. There were a handful of disabled characters in some of the shows, but these were played by non-disabled performers seemingly without consideration for the implications. Inclusion is clearly a marginal concern, if considered at all, for the majority of TYA practitioners around the world, but once the conversation is opened up, as happened in fringe conversations at the festival, then curiosity is often piqued. The “Whose Theatre Is It Anyway” day therefore should be seen as a modest beginning, a marker put down for the future. There is a change of leadership within ASSITEJ, with Yvette Hardie from South Africa elected as the new president and a new constitution, working plan and new executive committee. Inclusive Theatre is now firmly on the ASSITEJ agenda and there is a willingness to be much more ambitious about inclusion in the future. On the fringes of ASSITEJ 2011, there were tantalising glimpses of a variety of Inclusive Theatre practices taking place all over the world. It would not be true to say that the UK is alone in creating Inclusive TYA. During the “Whose Theatre Is It Anyway” day, Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic ran a dance workshop demonstrating her work with sensory-impaired artists in Belgrade, Serbia. Sanja spoke movingly about how Inclusive Theatre was under-developed in Serbia, reflecting the lower status of disabled people in her country. Nevertheless, she has been pioneering techniques for enabling visually-impaired and deaf performers to produce high quality work.

There are also some exceptionally strong examples of Inclusive Theatre across the world, but without the specific focus on young audiences. For example, Back to Back Theatre (Australia), Nalaga'at (Israel) and the excellent Mooms (Sweden), who were the UK delegation's hosts in Malmö, all have strong and established ways of working.

It is also worth highlighting that a great deal of Theatre for Development work, while not necessarily self-identifying as Inclusive Theatre, has the stories and concerns of disabled people at its heart. I attended the forum on Theatre for Development in Copenhagen at ASSITEJ 2011, chaired jointly by Yvette Hardie and Hope Azeda (Rwanda), where the subject of Inclusive TYA was raised. Delegates from the four corners of the globe started to speak about hidden examples of Inclusive Theatre. Eliane Chagas from Benin quietly handed me a flyer for the Festival International de Theatre et de Musique pour Personnes Handicapees that took place in May 2011. She told me about a play created by a group of Benin's wheelchair users, campaigning to stop non-disabled people from faking disability to gain state handouts. Sitting next to Eliane in Copenhagen was serendipitous, but indicates that all over the world theatre-makers are compelled to explore stories of disabling barriers. And perhaps we don't know about this work, not because it isn't high quality, but because the meagre resources available to these artists are being expended on art rather than marketing. It is clear that Theatre for Development is quietly and effectively exploring disability and is typically being

created by and about people living with HIV/AIDS, people disabled by land-mines and those with mental health issues as a result of living in war zones. If we are to be ambitious as Inclusive TYA pioneers, then we need to recognise that our comparatively well-developed practice in the UK offers a wonderful platform to initiate dialogue and exchange with these potential international partners.

Photo Credit: Kazzum



What next?

So, there are some straightforward actions that will make the most of Inclusive TYA's huge potential. Most importantly, if vision is to become reality, stakeholders such as the Arts Council, ASSITEJ and the British Council will need to sit up, take notice and back the ideas with adequate resources.

Here are some achievable objectives:

1. A piece or pieces of high quality Inclusive TYA from the UK programmed into the ASSITEJ Festival in Warsaw 2014. TYA-UK is very pleased to be starting a dialogue with ASSITEJ Poland on programming work for the next Congress in Warsaw 2014, and is delighted that there is now a Disability sub-committee within the Executive of ASSITEJ to discuss and champion this area. The work of the TYA-UK group has clearly had a significant impact in this development.
2. A portable roadshow package to be created for conferences, festivals and other events in the UK and further afield. The "Whose Theatre Is It Anyway" day contained a range of stimulating presentations, workshops and an installation that could be adapted.
3. A book of articles written by leading Inclusive TYA practitioners to be published as a core text for practitioners and students.

4. TYA USA has started a mapping of Inclusive TYA work. The information the UK team gathered to take and show in Malmö is being added to this list. We must all work together to seek out and keep this information accessible and relevant.

5. A mini-festival of Inclusive TYA in the UK in 2013. The best international work, including Theatre for Development work, to be shared.

6. The Arts Council to commission a strategic project about prominence for this work, to deliver these concrete outcomes and more.

I hope this report itself will lead to greater discussion and to encourage artists, theatre producers and stakeholders to lend their support. The recommendations above are modest and achievable, representing the first steps in a more ambitious vision. The UK is in a position to lead in this field, and to become both a beacon and a hub for the development of this work worldwide.

If not now ... when?

Danny Braverman
March 2012



Photo Credit: Graee



Who We Were

Keynote and workshop team

Daryl Beeton, Chair
Avril Hitman
Tim Webb
Danny Braverman
Rosie Emanuel
Kirsty Hoyle
Gill Brigg
Jen Goddard

Kazzum
Maggie Dance
Oily cart
The Orpheus Centre
The Orpheus Centre
Unicorn Theatre for Children
Nottingham University
Replay Theatre (Northern Ireland)

International speakers:

Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic
Suzanna Hellberg
Per Thörnquist

Core member and Program Director of DAH Theatre Research Centre, Serbia
Adminstrator, Moomstaetern, Sweden
Producer / Director, Moomsteatern

Bamboozle "Jellyfish" Installation Team:

Christopher Davies
Skatz
Laurie Guthrie
Amy Whittle
Julia Disney
Emily Croxford

Director/Producer
Actor/Musician
Actor/Musician
Actor/Musician
Actor/Musician
Designer

"Mapping" Installation Team:

Gill Brigg
Emma Kesterton
Hannah Gray

Producer
Designer and Maker
Designer and Maker

Film Maker:
Producer:

Steve Poxson
Vicky Ireland TYA UK

Photo Credit: Hijinx



TYA_UK

We are the UK Centre of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, known worldwide as ASSITEJ, a network for makers and promoters of professional theatre for young audiences. Under our local name TYA-UK we offer links to theatres, organisations and individual artists around the world. Our members and partners in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland deliver, support and promote:

- high quality theatre experiences for all children and young people
- professional development for established and emerging artists
- festivals and conferences
- information about plays, artists, events and trends worldwide
- research into new approaches

We welcome new members as organisations or as individuals. Professional theatre companies of adult performers for young audiences, individual theatre artists working for young audiences, researchers, teachers, theatre venue programmers, parents and people interested in high quality theatre for children and young people are all welcome to join. While many of our members offer related activities, such as youth theatre, drama classes or educational drama programmes, TYA-UK focuses on the promotion and development of professional theatre for young audiences.

www.tya-uk.org



