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ALWAYS THE AUDIENCE NEVER THE STAR

THE EXPERIENCES OF PERFORMERS WITH HIGH PHYSICAL ACCESS
REQUIREMENTS IN LONDON THEATRES

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Always the Audience Never the Star

Welcome to the CRIPtic Arts Always the Audience (Never the Star) research project. It researches the experiences of specific groups of disabled people who are trying to work in theatres in London. We called it Always the Audience because we feel like we are expected to only ever be the audience at a show, and we feel like we are never given what we need to be the performer or technical crew for the show.

In this research, we had conversations with disabled people who face particularly high barriers to physically accessing performance careers in London - focussing on people who need more support than simple wheelchair access. We did this because we felt like we couldn't find organisations that were able to support us in our careers.

Our research team is made up of people who face these barriers, giving us deep personal understanding of these problems. However, we had conversations with a wide range of other people and organisations as well.

Jamie Hale

Jamie Hale
Artistic Director; CRIPtic Arts

In our new research report, “Always the Audience, Never the Star,” we explored the experiences of disabled performers in London who face significant physical access barriers to working in theatre.

Our study focussed specifically on performers who need constant personal care support, rely on hoist-adapted toilets or Changing Places facilities, use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), or require adaptive technologies to access computers.

We focussed on people who work, or want to work in London, because London has opportunities of lots of different kinds for performers, and we wanted to know whether those opportunities were open to disabled performers.

As researchers, we chose to focus on these groups in London because they face some of the highest physical access barriers to building performance careers, yet their experiences are rarely centred in research. We are also ourselves disabled performers facing these barriers, so we knew these experiences and perspectives needed to be highlighted.



We conducted the research through a survey, interviews, and focus groups with disabled performers in our networks, as well as formal interviews with three major disabled-led theatre companies in London.

We also hoped to interview theatre companies and venues of different sizes in London, but we had difficulty getting them to engage.

Through our research, we identified a number of key barriers and themes in the experiences of disabled performers with high physical access needs:



Key Themes

01

ACCESSIBILITY

The performers we spoke to faced significant barriers around physical accessibility and access to funding for personal care support and creative support when working at venues. Specific issues mentioned included a lack of information about accessibility provisions, a lack of wheelchair access to performance spaces, and a lack of hoist-adapted toilets and private changing spaces. Venues were often keen to change when issues were highlighted.

02

PROCESSES AND TIME

We found that standard industry timeframes and processes often don't properly accommodate the access needs of disabled performers. More time and flexibility is required around elements like scheduling, applications, rehearsals, workshops, etc. to make these achievable. When disabled performers have to work in inaccessible ways they are not able to do their best work. Theatre companies highlighted that access needs to be considered from the beginning of funding, contracting, scheduling and arrangements. When it's not in place correctly, this becomes a safeguarding issue.

03

FUNDING

There is frequently insufficient or absent funding allocated in budgets to cover access support costs. This left many performers feeling pressure to constantly justify any additional costs associated with their access needs, which negatively impacted their self-worth. More funding specifically for personal care support and other accessibility provisions is critically needed.

04

ONLINE WORK

Online and virtual work facilitated access for some of the performers we spoke to, and they contained many creative possibilities. However many still faced barriers around accessibility issues with online platforms and lack of support for people to use them

05

INTERNAL ETHOS VS EXTERNAL BARRIERS

We found disabled-led companies aim to make their work as accessible as possible to people who faced the kinds of access needs we were researching, but participants highlighted how complex meeting these needs can become. They also still face barriers around issues like inaccessible venues, insufficient funding, etc which made it hard for these organisations to truly operate according to their ethos. This demonstrated to us that more widespread, industry-level change is needed.

06

ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS

Persistent low expectations and lack of availability of specialised training opportunities posed barriers to disabled performers developing their skills, experience and careers. Some were only given access to entry-level opportunities despite having extensive experience. At the same time, for others, smaller venues being inaccessible meant that they could only start their careers at larger venues. There were a lack of opportunities at the midpoint.

07

ONLINE WORK

Shared experience and representation within the disability community were identified as powerful tools that opened up creative possibilities, but participants also identified that it is important that we remain open to new networks of people, outside those people already known to us.

Key Recommendations

Based on these key findings, we developed several practical recommendations that we believe could help make the performing arts industry more accessible and inclusive for disabled talent facing high physical access barriers:

- 01 FUNDING**
Increase flexible funding allocated to cover higher access support costs
- 02 ORGANISATIONAL TRAINING**
Ensure organisations have had the training they need to work with disabled performers, and that this is led by disabled performers who are properly paid for their time and any materials.
- 03 SUPPORT**
Offer consistent, sustained engagement opportunities for disabled performers throughout their careers
- 04 FLEXIBILITY**
Embrace flexibility in standard processes to make them better suit disabled performers' needs
- 05 TRANSPARENCY**
Improve transparency around accessibility provisions and limitations
- 06 HOLISTIC APPROACH**
Take a holistic approach that considers physical, communication, emotional, mental health, and external factors together rather than separately



Bringing these recommendations together suggests how the industry can change, such that people have their access needs met and can carry out their best creative work. We hope these findings and recommendations will help push the performing arts industry towards becoming more inclusive.

Jessi Parrott
Lead Researcher

Jamie Hale
Researcher & Project Lead

Team



Dr Jessi Parrott is a disabled and neurodivergent researcher specialising in disability as an employment issue in UK theatre and television. They are also a creative and performer – of both their own and other people’s work – and a playwright, poet, consultant, trainer and facilitator. In both their practice and their research, they are incredibly passionate about holding space for, and platforming, other artists and creatives, and advocating for the arts industries to become more equitable, inclusive and accessible. Jessi was commissioned by CRIPTic Arts to conduct the research for Always the Audience in a freelance capacity.

Jamie Hale is the founder and Artistic Director of CRIPTic Arts, and designed and secured funding for this research project. Their research background spans from art and accessibility to policy and co-production. They were a co-lead researcher on Access to Literature, exploring the barriers faced by disabled writers, and led If Not Now, Then When? researching the experiences of disabled people in Lewisham. They have an active creative career as a writer across multiple forms, performer, and director. Jamie is passionate about making spaces for all disabled people to access creativity in ways that are shaped to meet their needs, seeking the creative possibilities in accessibility.



CRIPtic Arts

CRIPtic Arts is a creative development organisation focused on making the arts industry more accessible, and supporting, developing, and championing deaf and disabled people across the industry. It has carried out varied research into the experiences of disabled people in the industry

Spread the Word

Spread the Word is London’s literature development agency, a charity and a National Portfolio client of Arts Council England. It is funded to help London’s writers make their mark on the page, the screen and in the world and build strategic partnerships to foster a literature ecology which reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary Britain.

Red Pencil

Red Pencil is an independent consultancy agency working exclusively with charities and social purpose organisations. Founded 20 years ago, the Red Pencil team works across marketing, brand, research and fundraising with charities from small arts organisations to household names to build relationships and communicate impact.

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