

Live Art and Access

Working with the d/Deaf community

Karl Taylor

Last night as part of our monthly programme 'Double Thrills', we put on *\$elfie\$* by choreographer Marikiscrycrycry which began with the song *I'm A Nasty Hoe* by Ugly God repeated seven times, and contained a couple of raps (one of them in German). We'd planned for it to be interpreted into BSL (British Sign Language) by local Deaf artist Bea Webster - who's currently undertaking the fantastic BA in Performance in BSL and English at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She'd translated and learnt the songs, however hadn't anticipated that the volume of the music onstage would interfere with her cochlear implant. It meant that she couldn't follow where she was in the song.

So I spent the show sitting on the front row facing Bea with a script of lyrics, repeatedly lipsyncing 'I'm a nasty hoe, I'm a nasty hoe' so she could follow my lips. This weird little exchange became such a key part of the performance that several audience members said it was one of their favourite elements.

I wanted to start with this as I think it represents BUZZCUT's relaxed, good humoured approach to accessibility for d/Deaf and disabled artists and audiences, and the accidental joy that emerges when we shift our working practices and expectations of how things should be done.

BUZZCUT was set up 6 years ago by two friends; Rosana Cade & Nick Anderson, and was founded on the idea that a festival is a unique opportunity for a mass of people to gather together and form a temporary community. It is a chance to share space and time, share experiences, share food, share homes and share ideas, ultimately strengthening that community. While we present performances and support artist development projects year-round, our major activity is still the annual festival, forming and reinforcing a temporary artistic community in The Pearce Institute - a 100 year old community centre in an ex-shipbuilding community in Govan, in the south of Glasgow. Over 50 artists and companies inhabit rooms in the building over five days, and at its heart is a huge social space with a bar, cafe and music.

In considering the festival as an ongoing community project, the politics of who is able to access this space, sit round the table and engage with the work presented, becomes more potently politicised. If an individual is interested and keen to attend but their needs have not been considered - or they have been considered and deemed too expensive or difficult - then the fundamental principles of an open community event are called into question.

We are constantly engaged in a process of identifying and removing social and physical barriers that restrict individuals' comfort, enjoyment or ability to access the festival. There are no tickets to attend and all events are pay what you can. We have a creche available so audiences can bring young children and still enjoy the festival. We make every attempt to disrupt hierarchies of audience members and artists - all artists are given equal pay and equal billing. No lanyards or private drinks receptions are allowed. We encourage an atmosphere in which audiences engage in mutual responsibility and support: let's build this thing together and look after each other whilst we do it.

Our support for d/Deaf and disabled artists and audiences is a central part of this mission, and as the festival has grown and developed, so have the steps we have taken to make our work accessible to as many people as we can.

- We write a clear access key in the programme highlighting which shows are sound based or highly visual and don't contain text, as well as all the additional services we've implemented (*V - Visual / S - Sound based / BSL - British Sign Language Interpreted / (BSL) - BSL on request / C - Captioned / AD - Audio Described*)
- Front of house volunteers read a basic written description of durational performances to visually impaired audience members on entry
- We have hearing loops for studio-based work and all shows with scripted text are captioned

- All shows with text are British Sign Language Interpreted, and there are roving interpreters in the bar and social space to facilitate conversation between Hearing/Deaf audiences and support d/Deaf visitors using the café and bar or asking for programme information
- There is a silent rest area with beds, in order for people to relax, recover or otherwise take time out from the extremely busy and socially demanding festival environment
- All spaces are wheelchair accessible
- All staff and volunteers receive Disability Equality Training in order to provide the best service to disabled audience members. We receive this training from the fantastic Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, however many organisations across the UK provide this training.
- A number of our festival volunteers work as Access Officers whose sole responsibility is to assist artists and audience members with specific access needs

We've received a lot of praise for the access measures we have implemented at BUZZCUT, predominantly from non-disabled peers, but we still have questions. If BUZZCUT is about generating a new community together, simply adapting a pre-existing festival structure to allow the participation of d/Deaf and disabled people isn't enough. The structure needs to be re-designed collaboratively.

There was a particular moment in which I think we began to see potential for this in Live Art. Throughout the 2017 festival, local Deaf artists Danni Wright, EJ Raymond and Jamie Rea hosted in BSL, standing onstage and telling people about the show schedule and other key information. Jamie hosted in drag and Danni and EJ hosted as a double act, both dressed as David Bowie with borrowed glitter jackets and lightning facepaint. They were funny, welcoming, charming and totally in keeping with the spirit and energy of the festival. With Deaf artists onstage, the interpreters stood on the floor

and spoke the English interpretation into microphones; the BSL information, performed in cabaret personas, was front and centre. And as these BSL speeches always finished with the BSL applause (waving hands in front of the body), at our final closing party at three in the morning, the audience were so used to this that they joined in unprompted – over 200 drunk people moving as a community, shifting their behaviour for a minority amongst them. I found it very moving.

This gradual re-structuring needs to be also reflected in the performance work itself, where our biggest successes have been the artistic incorporation of BSL through our collaborations with BSL Interpreters and the d/Deaf community. I spoke to Interpreter Amy Cheskin about the habit of interpreters being dressed in black and signing at the side of the stage, and the potential of a new method:

It can make a Deaf audience feel like an afterthought. Whilst it can be engaging storytelling, it's often an add-on and it's sometimes unintelligible for all the action it's missing. It ticks a box. It all sits separate, happening in a different space, in a different time: us and them.

When something is integrated, as an audience member you feel invited to invest in the whole performance. You can move your gaze between performer and interpreter without changing emotional currency.

Likewise for a hearing audience the interpreter or deaf performer stops being the irritant - the fly - it moves and shifts the values in the space. It heightens their understanding without distraction or taking anything from the piece.

Live Art offers particularly ripe territory for integration. Live Artists are rarely content with ignoring another body onstage with them; they want – and need – to address how this new body shifts power and space. The interpreters we work with are artists in their own right, and their collaborations with our visiting artists have led to some of my favourite moments in performance:



Top: Jamie Rea, BSL host at BUZZCUT, 2017. (Photographer unknown)
 Bottom: The BUZZCUT team, 2017. Photo by Julia Bauer
 Overleaf: APOCALIPS, a newly formed feminist punk band in English and BSL, BUZZCUT, 2017. Photo by Julia Bauer



Figs in Wigs - Often Onstage

Five dancers perform as a drag-king Backstreet Boys tribute band. Interpreter **Catherine King** dressed in a green wig and glittery monobrow, signs the entire song *Everybody (Backstreet's Back)* with a massive floor fan blowing her hair as if she was in a nineties music video.

Ultimate Dancer - YAYAYA AYAYAY

Over twenty minutes, Ultimate Dancer fragments the sentence 'What am I doing here?' to repetitive choreography lit by a flickering lightbulb. Interpreter **Natalie MacDonald** is so dimly lit that you can barely see her fragmenting and repeating the signed phrase. The choreography and staging perfectly synchronises with the signing.

johnsmith - johnsmith LIVE: whatever being

In total darkness, johnsmith lip-syncs to KRAFTWERK's *We Are The Robots* with a flashing light in their mouth. Interpreter **Yvonne Strain** signs to the song with glow in the dark gloves and lipstick. It's epic.

The response to johnsmith's piece was particularly positive from some of our Deaf audience members, who highlighted that johnsmith's skill at lip-syncing allowing them to understand them, even without the interpreter, making the interpretation a shared enhancement for both Hearing and Deaf audiences who can lip-read. This response has prompted discussion around lip-sync as a potential performance device that has resonance for both Deaf and LGBTQIA+ communities, and an exciting starting place for Queer/Deaf artists to investigate collaboratively.

It is these vibrations and unexpected meeting points that we want to encourage within BUZZCUT. They create a model for cultural practice in which accessibility is not only seen as a moral, political and legal duty, but also as an exciting and enriching creative opportunity to re-invent our working practices as well as our understanding of performance and community.

There are a huge number of organisations doing amazing work to support d/Deaf and disabled citizens in Scotland particularly. The arts community here is developing a reputation for real leadership in this area. Some organisations and initiatives of note include:

SQUIFF (Scottish Queer International Film Festival) is an annual film festival for LGBTQIA+ films. It's comprised of a large committee (17 members) including several members who identify as Deaf or disabled, in order to ensure they have the right spread of experience 'in house' to implement access strategies. Similar to BUZZCUT, they consider access in it's broadest sense – on their access page they have information about content notes and gender neutral toilets alongside all their information regarding captioning, wheelchair access, etc. They also have a fantastically clear and detailed ticketing system which operates on a sliding scale and is completely tied into these access policies. Instead of a standard 'pay what you can' request, they ask bookers to choose from a series of statements which correspond to different ticket prices. For example, 'I frequently stress about meeting my basic needs and don't always achieve them (food, clothing, transport)', 'I may stress about meeting my basic needs but still regularly achieve them', 'I am comfortably able to meet my basic needs'. The price paid for a ticket is then adjusted accordingly.

Birds of Paradise are a disability-led theatre company employing disabled actors and performers, and committed to ensuring their performances are as accessible as possible. They ensure accessible performance tools are brought in at the very beginning of an idea's creative development. *Purposeless Movements* by **Robert Softley Gale** in 2016 was comprised of four actors with Cerebral Palsy sharing their experiences through text and choreography. BSL Interpreter **Amy Cheskin** was involved throughout the rehearsal process and was incorporated into the choreography. I remember one powerful moment where one of the actors crawled across the stage with her on his back. In addition to making performance works, the company also offers accessibility consultancy and Disability Equality Training.

Turtléar is an organisation led by Deaf artist and producer **EJ Raymond** that supports Deaf artists and promotes BSL incorporated performance work in Scotland. They do this through marketing videos and reviews in BSL, consultancy with organisations, and audience development within the Deaf community. They are currently planning a one-on-one performance festival with Deaf and Hearing artists, creating work in which no BSL interpreter should be required, as often interpreters have to accompany Deaf audiences into one-on-one performances, restricting intimacy and changing the nature of the private exchange.

The BA in Performance in BSL and English is a totally unique three year course at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (set up in in collaboration with local disability arts organisation **Solar Bear**) which provides actor training, teaches devising techniques, and exposes the students to a wide variety of performance practices. At BUZZCUT we collaborate heavily with these students, so if you're looking to work with amazing Deaf actors and artists, you should definitely get in touch with them.

Making performance and its working environments more accessible to d/Deaf and disabled users – both artists and audiences – is an enriching and creatively stimulating process.

There is so much to gain, learn and share between rich and vibrant d/Deaf & disabled communities, that putting restrictions on access to your spaces, and preventing collaborative approaches to leadership, is detrimental not only to the cultural landscape, but to our wider society too.

Changing industry attitudes to access is an ongoing process, and we understand that these strategies will generate different outcomes for different organisations, but at BUZZCUT we have learned that if we approach it with an open and flexible attitude, rather than a checklist, and we continue to re-think and prioritise our work in this area, the entire experience becomes richer, more interesting and more enjoyable for everyone involved.