

Welcoming Deaf People to Your Venue

In creating a show that d/Deaf and hearing audiences can enjoy equally, we have come across some excellent resources and tried to create a very simple, digestible starting point to help venues and companies develop their accessibility for d/Deaf audiences.

ONE - For many d/Deaf people, written English is a Second Language

This was a surprise to us, but when you think about it, it's obvious that there is no direct correlation between sign language and the written word.

Venues can do two key things to help:

- Create promotional materials in BSL - ie videos, not printed text.
- Have visual signage in the venue, not just written English.

TWO - Having a BSL interpreter is not a Magic Bullet

One of the big issues around d/Deaf accessibility is that BSL interpreters are sometimes used as “add-ons”. The presence of an interpreter does not necessarily make a performance accessible for d/Deaf audiences.

In the research referenced below, the results strongly suggested that Sign Language Interpreted Performances are “not effective in providing access”.

Venues can do a few things to help:

- Audiences need to be able to see the interpreter - ie not too far away, or obscured.
- The interpreter should be integral to the performance. For example, the interpreter should be close enough to the action to allow d/Deaf audiences to follow the action and the interpretation. The interpreter could be aesthetically connected to the performance - ie an interpreter in “normal” clothes takes the d/Deaf audience out of the world of the show every time they look at them.
- Seats could be reserved for d/Deaf audience members in an area where they can get an excellent view of the interpreter.

THREE - Signed performances are not the same as BSL interpreted performances

Signed performances are shows that are performed in sign language.

BSL Interpreted performances have English spoken and then interpreted for d/Deaf audiences.

In essence, there is a difference between performance that are primarily for d/Deaf audiences, and performances which attempt to include d/Deaf audiences.

AN EXTRA FOR ARTISTS - Be d/Deaf Accessible from Day One

If you want to create work that is d/Deaf accessible, have that in mind from day one of the creative process.

The writing, devising and rehearsal of all aspects of “The Immigrant” have been led by a d/Deaf accessibility mission statement:

“Regardless of the inclusion of music and sound effects, d/Deaf audience members should be able to experience the show as an equal with hearing audience members. Most importantly, while watching the show, a d/Deaf audience member should never think that a hearing audience member has enjoyed a moment that was inaccessible to them.”

ONLINE RESOURCES

There are many great online resources about d/Deaf accessibility.

“**The Limping Chicken**” is a fantastic blog about Deaf issues. David Thompson’s article about theatre for d/Deaf audiences is here:

<https://limpingchicken.com/2019/02/26/david-thompson-theatres-will-they-never-learn/>

Michael Richardson and David Thompson have conducted some excellent research around the potential of equality of access to theatre for deaf and hearing people here:

http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org/Richardson_Thompson_deaf_people_and_theatrical_public_sphere_SJoP0502_DOI_10.14439/sjop.2018.0502.02.html

We have included their “Best Practice Checklist” for theatres at the end of this document.

The **Accessible Theatre** website is another useful resource.

Link here for advice for accessibility coordinators:

<http://www.accessibletheatre.org.uk/access-co-ordinators/>

Link here for advice for advice about marketing BSL performances:

<http://www.accessibletheatre.org.uk/access-co-ordinators/british-sign-language/marketing-your-bsl-performance/>

Solar Bear, a Scottish theatre company with experience of working with Deaf actors have an excellent online guide:

<https://solarbear.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/best-practice-for-accessible-theatredoco.pdf>

Attitude is Everything is a great resource for venues promoting music to d/Deaf audiences. It’s a common misconception that Deaf people wouldn’t be interested in live music. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

<http://www.attitudeiseverything.org.uk/resources/practical-guides/closed-r2>

David Thompson's "Best Practice Checklist" for Theatres*

1. For each show, identify the ways in which it might be accessible for Deaf spectators—visual theatre with no dialogue, Deaf theatre in sign language, SLIP, captioned, super-titled opera—and add this information to all marketing material connected to the show.
2. In the case of a SLIP [Sign Language Interpreted Performance], add the name of the interpreter, the position in which they will stand (right or left side of the stage when looking from the audience perspective), and whether they are a local interpreter or touring with the production.
3. Upload the information from above to the theatre / company website and to other websites where d/Deaf audiences may look for information eg, the Access Scottish Theatre website.
4. Upload to the theatre / company website recent photographs of the actors in the production and a sign language video giving information about the synopsis for each show that specifically targets Deaf spectators.
5. Use this 'Deaf-friendly' marketing material to target Deaf spectators through appropriate channels, for example, Deaf clubs and Deaf online spaces.
6. Hold seats for Deaf spectators that have a good view of both the interpreter and the stage: in the stalls, on the same side of the auditorium as the interpreter and approximately 10 to 12 rows back from the stage.
7. Set up a pre-performance talk in sign language, with recent photographs of actors and an opportunity to introduce not only the synopsis, but also the sign names for characters and locations. Market this to Deaf spectators and book an interpreter or other sign language user to deliver it.
8. Before the performance, indicate pictorially the position of the interpreter on auditorium doors, so that Deaf patrons can check they have the right seats before entering. Be prepared to offer replacement seats if the position of the interpreter has changed from that advertised.
9. Ensure that programmes include photographs of the actors who will be performing, rather than standard publicity shots with actors who are no longer members of the cast.
10. After the show, provide a forum for post-show discussion in sign language. Video the feedback and use it for subsequent audience development.

* We have slightly amended the original text to include relevance to English theatres and theatre producing companies.