



Theatre for Young People with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities

Lucy Garland and Amber Onat Gregory

In 2012 *Seeing Beyond* and *Tell Me A Tale* were given an Arts Council England grant to create a theatre production specifically for 13-25 year olds with PMLD.

Seeing Beyond is a theatre company run by myself (Lucy Garland) that is based in Norwich. For the past six years Seeing Beyond has been creating small scale multi-sensory storytelling shows for children and young people with PMLD. These shows have toured to special schools throughout East Anglia.

Tell Me A Tale, run by Amber Onat Gregory, is a London based theatre company that, alongside its other work, also creates multi-sensory storytelling shows. Amber has been creating this work for six years and during this time has travelled extensively with her work. She has taken multi-sensory theatre to Turkey, Dubai and Australia. In Australia, Amber was part of a collective of artists who started Sensorium, Australia's first multi-sensory theatre

company for children with complex disabilities. Although Amber is now back in the UK Sensorium is still going strong in Western Australia (www.sensoriumtheatre.com).

In 2012 we decided to work collaboratively to extend our practice and create a large scale theatre production specifically for teenagers and young people with PMLD. Both of us had become aware that when we performed in schools the shows were being performed to groups of children from as young as three, all the way up to 19 year olds. We felt that although the audiences seemed to enjoy the shows we wanted to work together with the aim of creating an age appropriate piece of theatre for 13-25 year olds.

There are currently more arts experiences created for younger children and we felt it important that young people with PMLD be given the same opportunities. The UN Convention on Children's Rights, Article 31 states that 'State Parties recognise the right of the child... 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 thought it important to create a piece of theatre that was appropriate for both the individual needs of our audience as well as their ages. We felt passionately about creating a piece of high quality theatre that could tour theatre venues nationally. Previously we had primarily worked in special schools and felt that although providing theatre in a school is incredibly important, especially due to accessibility, we also wanted to give young people the opportunity of an accessible production in a theatre venue. We wanted to create theatre that could stand up next to the highest quality mainstream theatre with the only difference being that it was accessible to a specific audience.



Multisensory theatre

To make this project a reality we needed funding to ensure the quality of the work. Multi-sensory theatre is extremely prop and design heavy due to the sensory aspect and it would have been impossible to achieve the high quality theatrical experience we were aiming for without funding. Due to the small numbers in our audiences (we perform to groups of six audience members + their carers/parents/teachers) we are unable to fund the work through ticket sales. The small audience numbers are crucial for the needs of our audience and to ensure that they receive the best experience possible. We received our main grant from The Arts Council England and were also kindly funded by The Boshier Hinton Foundation, Norfolk Community Foundation, The Islington Council, The Helen Foundations and The Co-Op Customer Donation Fund. In September 2012 we began to develop our new show: Tunnels.

Our main aim was to look at how to make the show suitable for 13-25 years olds without making the story too complex. Part of the beauty of multi-sensory work is its simplicity. Both companies have always worked with stories, be that traditional or original work. We take a story and then adapt it using sensory elements to enhance the audiences experience and enjoyment of the show. Each part of the story/performance is

accompanied by a sensory experience, a smell, something to touch, sounds or lighting change.

A fantastic adventure

We decided to create a production that was an underground adventure- something out of this world. We looked at teenage fantasy films such as Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter for inspiration. We brought on a talented musician, Al Watts, who created an original score for the show and became a fantastic actor along the way. The music is integral to the piece and helped keep the show age appropriate. During the development of the production we spent a day working at The Unicorn theatre in London with Tim Webb from Oily Cart who helped shape the show.

Tunnels is based around the main character, Lana, who lives in a cold, dark city. Lana is enticed down a Tunnel by Cardini, the master of the underground. Once underground, Cardini and her underground companion, Manu, take Lana on a journey through many different tunnels. Each tunnel corresponds with a different light, sensory and sound experience. Tunnels is set in the round making it a collective experience for the audience. The audience enter and leave the space through a tunnel that is large enough for wheelchairs and care beds. Some audience members have even chosen to watch the entire production from inside the tunnel! We take care when creating the production to create a safe space that the audience have the flexibility to move around in if that is what they choose to do.

After the initial development we took Tunnels on the road and toured it to nine special schools in Norfolk, Suffolk, London and Devon. The aim of the school tour was to see how audiences responded to the show and to see how it could develop it further. The tour was a success and feedback from the schools and audience

members really helped in the further development. We looked at incorporating more collaborative sensory aspects, really defining the moments of individual 1:1 attention and collective sensory and theatrical experience. We explored how to make the show more theatrical whilst still keeping the simplicity and sensory experience of the performance and how to define the different sections of the piece to make it clearer for the audience.

Performances at The Garage

After the re-development we took the show to The Garage in Norwich. The production was a part of their ‘Curtain Up’ season- as theatre season for young audiences. It was important to us that Tunnels was programmed alongside mainstream productions. The theatre space is a black box in a venue that specifically focuses on the arts for young people. The space was stripped of the stage and raked seating and we installed our set in the round. As soon as the show was in a theatre, the sensory elements seemed to become clearer, bigger and better. Surrounded by professional theatre lighting, surround sound and a blacked out area it enhanced the space and made it more magical. As supportive as the schools had been on the tour it is difficult to find a clear and quiet space to perform in at a school. We had grappled with the fact that the audience might be anxious with entering a strange space and was there really a need to take the young people out of a comfortable school environment where the show could also happen; their own school hall for example? Ultimately we decided that the pros outweighed the cons.



Part of our motivation in this project had been to provide young people with PMLD with experiences outside of school. We met teachers during the tour stating that they wanted to take their students on school excursions but that there was nothing accessible for them. We wanted to create accessible theatre that young people could have the choice to attend that was programmed alongside mainstream theatre shows and to bring issues of accessibility into the mainstream venues consciousness, to make people question why people with PMLD are excluded from theatre due to complex access needs. To reduce the audience’s anxieties each person that attended was supplied with a Social Story with photos of the venue, the actors and an explanation of what would happen on the day and in the show.

The theatre was briefed about the needs of the audience and front of house staff were made aware that any

audience member could leave or enter whenever they wanted throughout the production. We asked the theatre to keep any background noise to a minimum, no music in the foyer, tannoy etc. so that if an audience member needed to have some time out of the performance then the foyer area was a calm space. The performers also met the audience in the foyer and accompanied them into the space, therefore making the transition into the theatre space a smooth journey. All of this helped the audience and they seemed calmer and more responsive than they were in an often cluttered, cramped school environment.



We did three shows on the day at The Garage. The first two groups came from special schools in the region. The third show was at 5pm and was a public performance. This was very exciting for us as the young people came with their families and friends. As all of our previous performances had been in school venues we had never had the chance to perform to families. One of the reasons we had wanted to perform in a theatre venue was that we think it is important for young people with PMLD to be able to come to theatre with their friends and their family just as mainstream theatre goers do.

Accessible theatre

Performing Tunnels at The Garage reiterated to us the need for accessible theatre for audiences with PMLD in a theatre venue. Currently theatres across the UK are trying to improve their accessibility and the post of an Access Manager is becoming more common. Theatres are making their venues more accessible with ramps, toilets, hearing loops, sign interpretation, and even programming relaxed performances for audiences with autism. All of this is absolutely fantastic but there is still minimal work being programmed specifically for audiences with PMLD. People with PMLD often find it difficult to access mainstream theatre shows for many reasons: the stage is too far away; the text is complicated; the only senses that are really used are sight and sound (very difficult for blind or deaf people with PMLD) and you are expected to sit in one spot and stay silent. All of this on top of large audiences and mobility needs makes mainstream theatre almost unapproachable. One mother of a teenage audience member told us that her daughter loves live music and the theatre but the only shows she can go to are with young children because her daughter can be quite noisy.

Theatre venues need to realise that they are unintentionally excluding people with PMLD from their venues by not programming multi-sensory accessible theatre. It is not easy to program this work because it is unprofitable due to the small audience numbers in a climate where the arts are struggling financially. Theatres however have a moral duty to program this work and if not, examine why they don't already.

Now, is the perfect time for theatres to be approaching this issue with the publicity surrounding the Paralympics and the push on access in venues. Our goal is to get our work to as many theatre venues across the country and to give people with PMLD the opportunity to access an entertaining, imaginative and fun, theatrical experience.

Tunnels at The Garage brought us to the end of the funding we had to create the production. We are now hoping to secure funding to take Tunnels on a national theatre tour in early 2014.

Contact details

Lucy Garland, Artistic Director of Seeing Beyond
Photography by Andi Sapey

seeing-beyond@hotmail.co.uk
info@tellmeatale.org

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www.seeingbeyondtheatre.blogspot.co.uk
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