



Gerry Ramage, Artistic Director, Solar Bear

Interviewed by Emma McFarland, Research & Mapping Lead, Diverse Futures

Gerry is Artistic Director of Solar Bear, a theatre company based in Glasgow which creates exciting, innovative theatre with a strong social commitment and which pioneered theatre work with deaf young people in its deaf youth theatre programme. Solar Bear is working in partnership with Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to launch the first theatre degree course specifically for deaf actors in 2015.

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Tell us about Solar Bear and how you became involved with training deaf actors.

I set up Solar Bear in 2002 to provide opportunities in the performing arts for disadvantaged children and young people, including those who are looked after (‘in care’), excluded from school and young people with mental health problems. My work with the deaf community started when I was working on a production and we needed to cast a young deaf actor. It became clear how few there were and my discussions with the deaf community revealed they did not see theatre as an artform ‘for them’ – they felt completely disconnected from it.

I wanted to open up theatre to deaf young people and raised funds to pilot a deaf youth theatre which we set up ten years ago. It has gone from strength to strength and we now have 25 members.

What was the catalyst for the partnership with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland?

Some real talent started to emerge from the youth theatre group but there was nowhere for them to go for further training and there were few employment opportunities for them as actors. I was determined to change this and got in touch with Maggie Kinloch at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS). I didn’t know her well, but I knew she was committed to providing more training opportunities for disabled young people. Together we established a one year theatre skills short course for deaf actors at RCS, providing weekly two hour sessions. This has been a great success and now trains twelve people each year aged 17 – 40 years. It was a great learning opportunity for RCS, helping the staff to understand what it means to become fully accessible as an organisation and a building.

From working with deaf actors on the one year programme and our conversations with the wider theatre sector and the deaf community, it became clear there was a real demand for a degree programme for deaf actors. The strong partnership and understanding which Solar Bear and RCS had established through the short course programme was crucial to making this happen.

Can you tell us more about the course? How have you gone about making the course more accessible to deaf students?

One of the most important ways in which we are facilitating access to the degree is by not specifying any academic requirements. Entry is based on the potential demonstrated by the candidate in the application, interview and audition. Our only requirement outside this is a workable level of British Sign Language or spoken English if students use it. This is very important as institutional barriers to learning often mean that deaf young people’s academic achievements are lower in comparison to the hearing population.

The degree is being designed at the moment, ready for the first cohort of students in September 2015. We are pooling elements of the existing RCS Acting degree and Contemporary Performance Practice degree and incorporating new visually orientated elements such as puppetry. There are twelve people working on

the design of the degree, including a deaf artist, someone working in deaf education, a sign language interpreter and RCS and Solar Bear staff. Four of these twelve people are deaf.

At Solar Bear we work with each person as an individual. Everybody, whether disabled or not, comes with a different set of skills, abilities, fears, strengths and challenges. In this way, our approach to training deaf actors is not that different to working with any other group. It has been developed and refined through our work with deaf people in the rehearsal room. Our approach focuses on visual theatre which combines spoken world, visual language and sign language. The degree programme is based on these same principles.

The course will be delivered in British Sign Language and spoken English and interpreters will be provided in all sessions, including the interview and audition. All assignments can be submitted either in writing or in signed format via film.

Twelve places will be offered, eight UK based and four international. For the first few years at least, we will only have a new intake every three years. This gives us the opportunity to work more intensively with students and gives us time to review the course and incorporate learning into the course development. We also want to make sure employment opportunities exist at the end of the course for graduates and this gives us time to work with the theatre sector to make this happen.

What is the background of the Tutors who teach on the degree course?

The tutors on the degree programme are a mix of RCS lecturers/tutors, Solar Bear staff and guest tutors. The RCS staff, and the voice department in particular, are very excited about the challenges and opportunities the degree programme will bring. The experience of delivering the short course at RCS has helped prepare the ground for the degree programme and build tutors' skills in working with deaf students. Solar Bear also delivers deaf awareness and BSL training with students and staff, to help make the whole building deaf aware/friendly.

Are you working on other initiatives to extend access to disabled students? Do you have plans to develop the partnership with RCS further?

We have our hands full launching the new degree at the moment and this is our priority. Alongside this work, we are working with the mainstream theatre sector to build employment opportunities for deaf actors and to build audiences for their work. There is no point in training deaf actors for the stage if there are no jobs for them and/or no one wants to watch them. We want deaf actors to gain employment in the mainstream and not be 'ghettoised'. We're very hopeful that over time, sub-titled deaf performances on television and signed performances in theatres will become more common.

We employ three deaf theatre apprentices through Creative Scotland, whose role is to provide deaf awareness training, including basic sign language, in theatre companies and venues. This work is critical to building deaf audiences and has been very successful. Many leading theatres have taken part including the Citizens Theatre, Lyceum Edinburgh and Dundee Rep.

We have also set up a deaf theatre club which works with theatre companies to offer reduced price tickets to deaf members alongside pre and post show discussions and opportunities for deaf audiences to feedback to theatre directors and producers. It now has over 300 members across Scotland and is proving an invaluable audience development opportunity for theatres.

Unfortunately, there are few other places internationally working to promote opportunities for deaf people in theatre, whether through youth theatre, training or in audience development, so one of our other areas of work is to provide fellowships to enable our learning to be taken back to other countries. We recently hosted two fellows, one from Australia and another from the USA.

Why do you think progress is so slow in terms of widening access to further and higher education for disabled students in the performing arts?

People and institutions are a little bit scared and they think it will be too difficult. In reality, the hard part is starting it, the rest is easy. In terms of theatre practice, what we do is no different to the challenge of working with any other group.

There are additional costs involved – it costs about twice as much to train a deaf student as a hearing student, mainly due to the cost of interpreters. There are very few available and they are in demand, so costs are high. As deaf actors become more mainstream and more theatre interpreters are trained, we expect to see these costs fall. These costs are met by the Scottish Funding Council and, as with all Scottish degrees, the course is free to all students based in Scotland. Students from other parts of the UK pay tuition fees in line with other theatre degrees.

What advice would you give to a talented disabled young person who wishes to pursue a career in theatre and who is interested in applying to your course? How can they increase their chances of success in their application?

My advice would be if you want to go for it, go for it and don't stop until you achieve it. This all started because a group of 16 year olds in the deaf youth theatre said they wanted to train, to act. They got to that stage because they stuck at it and showed they had a real passion. Make sure someone hears you and knows you have a passion and keep at it. The challenge will always be to gain the youth theatre experience – Solar Bear's youth theatre is the only permanent year-round deaf youth theatre in the UK, but there are summer projects available in a few other places. The other challenge for young deaf people is a lack of role models. As deaf actors become more visible, we hope the journey will become easier for other young people.