



## **Nick Llewellyn, Artistic Director, Access All Areas**

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

Nick Llewellyn is Artistic Director of Access All Areas, a theatre company for people with learning disabilities based in Hackney, London. Projects include touring professional productions with their performance company, community arts programmes and a professional actors agency for learning disabled actors. Access All Areas launched the new Performance Making Diploma for students with learning disabilities in partnership with Royal Central School of Speech & Drama in 2014.

***“People will look at you as a disabled person when you walk on stage, don’t hide it, celebrate it, use it to inform your artistic practice.....tell your story in your own way”.***

### **Can you tell us about your background, Access All Areas and how your partnership with the Royal Central School of Speech & Drama developed?**

I trained in theatre at Royal Central School of Speech & Drama (RCSSD) and after working with the disability arts organisation, Hijinx, in Cardiff, worked at RSCSD as a Tutor. At the same time, I started working on a weekly performing arts project for young people with learning disabilities in Hackney which developed into the theatre company Access All Areas. Access All Areas tours professional theatre productions featuring learning disabled actors and performers, and runs a number of projects. These include an accredited training programme in theatre skills, a weekly community arts performing project and a casting agency for talented actors with learning disabilities, which has fulfilled professional contracts in TV, radio and theatre.

I always maintained a strong relationship with the staff at RCSSD and its outreach arm, Central Connects. We shared a passion to provide high quality professional training for young actors with learning disabilities, which is both relevant and meaningful. With the funding from the Leverhulme Trust, both organisations were able to work together to develop and launch the Performance Making Diploma at RCSSD.

### **Can you tell us more about the course?**

We launched the Diploma in January 2014 with 15 students, all of whom graduated in July 2014. The course is accredited at Level 2 on the Qualifications & Credit Framework and is a one year part-time diploma run over weekdays, evenings and weekends from January to July. The course develops skills as a performer, focussing on devised theatre. Students receive training from RCSSD Tutors and guest companies / artists in voice and physicality, collaboration and devising, politics of performance, the performing arts industry and produce a final production. Guest companies and lecturers include Punchdrunk, Frantic Assembly and Mat Fraser, a disabled cabaret artist who makes his own work and is a superb role model.

The course is not suitable for everyone, it requires students to be fairly independent – for example, they need to be able to navigate their own way into central London in rush hour. We do not have the resources to provide a ‘wrap around’ experience encompassing transport and other support. The majority of our students have mild to moderate learning disabilities such as Down’s Syndrome and Autism and we also have students with Cerebral Palsy with a learning disability. An awareness of performance and performative quality is essential but the ability to read or speak is less important. We’re not interested in moulding students into a certain type of performer, we’re interested in celebrating, exploring and extending their ‘difference’.

Each student is buddied up with an undergraduate/masters student at the college who helps them navigate their way around the college, studying and student life. Every year, four of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year Applied Theatre students and four students from the Diploma create and tour a performance around sixth form and tertiary colleges. Both these initiatives build bridges between the mainstream and learning disabled student communities and we hope both groups learn and are inspired by each other.

## **What is the background of your Tutors?**

All the RCSSD Tutors working on the course chose to be part of it - they were interested in being part of this journey of exploration. Liselle Terret, former Lecturer in Applied Theatre at RCSSD, is very knowledgeable in terms of learning disabled creative practice and was instrumental to getting the course up and running. We are working with Tutors to explore and develop their practice during the course. Many tutors come from a devised theatre background and this approach translates well to theatre work with learning disabled adults. While there is some teaching of technique, their focus is on teaching creativity. Tutors encourage students to learn to be free and to trust in the creative process, to develop lots of material and to find ways to edit, structure and layer it.

## **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?**

Academic barriers are the major obstacle to learning disabled students accessing higher education. Academic study relies on students having a very specific set of skills and abilities around essay writing and research, which many learning disabled students cannot access. This is why we developed this course - so that students would not be prohibited from accessing training at an institutions like RCSSD by an academic 'points' score. Funding is another major barrier with the cuts in disability student allowance and the financial pressures on FE and HE institutions. We are only able to offer this course because of the funding we receive from The Leverhulme Trust which allows us to offer heavily subsidised places.

## **What was the motivation/ catalyst for developing the course?**

Opportunities for actors with physical disabilities in mainstream theatre and television have been increasing over recent years, but in my opinion, despite recent successes such as the Royal Court casting a learning disabled actor in a lead role, this has not been matched by opportunities for actors with learning disabilities,. Physical disability seems to have a bigger 'voice' than learning disability. For example, in the Paralympic professional aerial cast, there were 42 performers with physical disabilities and / or sensory impairments and only one performer with learning disabilities.

One of the challenges learning disabled actors face in mainstream theatre and television work is that directors view their facial and other emotional responses as 'unreadable' to a mainstream audience. I want to equip learning disabled people to work in the mainstream media, ensuring that learning disabled roles are not 'played' by a non-disabled person as has so often been the case in the past. But, I'm also realistic. Opportunities will always be limited and I question the quality of the writing and the integrity of many of the roles.

In my view, the real focus needs to be on valuing and promoting the unique creativity of learning disabled theatre to mainstream audiences. We need to give learning disabled performers the confidence, knowledge and skills to enable them to be the authors of their own work and stories, creating their own devised shows, and their own unique 'brand' of theatre. A training which is less text based and more visually and physical theatre focused and integrated with other artforms including dance/movement is vital. I see my role and that of other companies, like Mind the Gap, Dark Horse and Hijinx, as championing the beauty of the work, voices and presence which comes from learning disabled actors/performers on stage.

## **Are you working on other initiatives to extend access to disabled students in FE/HE? Do you have plans to develop the partnership with RCSSD further?**

We are only just completing the first year of this course and want to put our energies into making sure this course thrives over the coming years. That's not to say another course couldn't happen in the future, but it is not a priority at the moment. I also think there is potential for a graduate from this course to progress to the BA (Hons) Collaborative & Devise Theatre course at RCSSD with support. That would be a fantastic achievement.

We see the Diploma as part of the whole range of services and projects which Access All Areas provides to learning disabled adults and young people who wish to pursue a career in theatre. For me, the important thing is that learning disabled actors and performers get out there, create high quality work, apply for funding and get their work seen. That will be real progress. A qualification might be part of that story, but I

don't think the goal is a world where learning disabled actors all have a degree. There are other ways to train and develop your skills.

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

Go and see as many performances as possible. If you can't see them 'live' watch as much as you can on YouTube. Know what's out there, be inspired by the work of different companies and artists.

Be honest with yourself. The world of the performing arts is a precarious and scary one at the best of times, and there is a vast difference between being part of a community arts project and the professional arts world. People will look at you as a disabled person when you walk on stage, don't hide it, celebrate it, use it to inform your artistic practice. If your motivation is being in films or on television, fame and a celebrity lifestyle, you need to realise, this is almost certainly not going to happen. If you want to go the 'mainstream' route, there are more and more opportunities on shows like soap operas. But question the reason those characters are there and how they are being portrayed.

Create your own shows, raise your own funding, work with other artists, explore children's theatre where there are more opportunities for learning disabled actors and performers. Tell your story in your own way.