



Richard Hayhow, Director, Open Theatre Company

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

Richard is Director of Open Theatre Company, an organisation which aims to place the creativity of young people with learning disabilities at the centre of the cultural life of Birmingham and Coventry. He has been working in the field of theatre and learning disability for over 30 years and is a passionate advocate for the talents and abilities of young people with learning disabilities.

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Can you tell me about your background in the performing arts and how you became involved in widening access to the performing arts for young people and artists with learning disabilities?

I started out studying for a degree in Drama and Education after a previous focus on Maths and Science and it changed my life in a huge way. The course focussed on experimental theatre making and ensemble theatre and was a revelation - I learned so much about myself and to think in new ways. I thought ‘if drama can do this for me, it can do it for other people’ and I wanted to share this incredible experience with others. This led me into work in community theatre, including 14 years at an arts centre in Worcester, and it was there that I first worked with people with learning disabilities. I realised from this experience that I felt the most creative work took place with these groups, and it was where I, as a practitioner, felt most creative.

I am driven by a belief that there is so much creativity ‘out there’ among so-called ‘ordinary people’ and that the exclusive world of traditional theatre is only one way of making theatre. I have been on a mission in my career to prove that theatre is not an exclusive right; that everyone has something to contribute and that work of high quality can be created with what might be called the untrained actor.

My desire to explore and direct this new kind of theatre led me to set up *The Shysters Theatre Company* in partnership with the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in 1997, working with 10 young people with learning disabilities aged 17-18 years. I learned so much about theatre and its potential working with this group, but I also learned that it’s crucial to start theatre work with actors with learning disabilities at a younger age to help to develop potential and to counter some of the challenges these groups encounter in society.

My work with *The Shysters* led me to undertake a number of co-productions with venues like the York Theatre Royal, but my focus has always been on what these groups can uniquely contribute, what they add to theatre, rather than about how I can enable them to access mainstream theatre. This is a crucial difference of emphasis. High quality theatre created and performed by actors with learning disabilities has its own unique aesthetic and I am interested in exploring this and working on ways it can be better developed, promoted and shared.

Following Arts Council England’s decision to cut regular funding to *The Shysters* in 2011, I was propelled from working intensively with a small number of individuals in a Company model into a different way of working. I started working, under the banner of ‘Open Theatre Company’ (OTC), with larger numbers of younger people in special schools and set up youth theatres for these young people. I realised it was crucial to provide progression routes and to mentor and support talented individuals, unlocking the right opportunities for them as and when they are ready for them. So my work now encompasses work in primary and secondary special schools, youth theatres, apprenticeships, exploring employment opportunities for actors with learning disabilities and establishing training courses.

Can you tell me more about the consortium you are establishing in Birmingham?

After *The Shysters* folded, I began to work in partnership with Birmingham Hippodrome to develop opportunities in theatre for young people with learning disabilities. We felt strongly that we needed to build a city-wide partnership to explore how to best create these opportunities and to enable these young people to contribute to the cultural life of Birmingham. So much work in the arts generally takes place in London, but Birmingham is not like London and the way the work is developing in Birmingham is quite different. We wanted to think big and we asked ourselves, why can't we make Birmingham the cultural hub for people with learning disabilities?

We organised a symposium to look at ways in which the arts, and in particular theatre practice can support the transition of young people with learning disabilities into adult life. The symposium was catalysed by two things in particular. Firstly, the statistic that 4 in 5 young people with mild to moderate learning disabilities are unemployed. Secondly, a challenge laid down by a Deputy Head of a Birmingham secondary special school who said after his students had experienced Open Theatre Company's theatre practice several times: "if we are to really address the problems that our young people face and enable them to lead meaningful, fulfilled lives where they can really make a positive contribution to society, we must recognise that this type of work should be commonplace in all special schools."

The symposium led to the development of a loose consortium of approximately 20 diverse arts organisations and venues in the city including mac, Birmingham Rep, The Drum, The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Ikon Gallery and Birmingham Hippodrome and Open Theatre Company. Virtually every arts organisation in the city has engaged with the consortium in some way.

Quality is one of the biggest issues in the learning disability arts sector. One of the reasons why there has been so little progression is the perception that there is no quality work. Part of the work of the consortium is to raise expectations, to have high aspirations and ambition and to support artists and arts organisations to embrace new ways of working. It is about collaboration and working together to achieve something much greater than we can all achieve working alone. The consortium connects people in different organisations and facilitates mentoring of practitioners and pilots new ways of working.

Alongside our plans to offer practitioners and actors with learning disabilities formal training, we are also encouraging venues to help make mainstream theatre performances more accessible. Since the consortium was established, the numbers of relaxed performances* in Birmingham has greatly increased and they are co-ordinated across venues to avoid programming clashes. With Birmingham Hippodrome in particular, OTC has produced short videos available on social media which introduce the relaxed performance and familiarise individuals with the venue.

Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe with under 25's accounting for nearly 40% of the population, and the consortium links into Birmingham City Council's youth arts strategy, advocating for the cultural needs of young people with learning disabilities within it.

What do you think are some of the challenges and also the most encouraging developments in theatre for young people / artists with learning disabilities at the moment?

When you have been in the sector as long as me, it can feel at times as though we are having to re-invent the wheel all the time; revisiting the same challenges rather than moving forward. One thing I think is crucial to progress is separating out learning and physical disability. Significant progress has been made in sport, the performing arts and in society more generally in terms of the visibility and acceptance of physical disabilities and the London 2012 Paralympics was a big part of this. The character in a wheelchair in the TV show *Silent Witness*, whose disability is never mentioned, is testament to this progress. Unfortunately, this progress has not been reflected to the same extent in terms of learning disability. Sometimes learning disability feels like the last frontier and I think part of the challenge is the invisibility of many learning disabilities. In order to make further progress, I think we have to focus on learning disability separately from physical disability as the issues and challenges are very different and we need different strategies to tackle them.

There has been some progress - companies like Mind the Gap and actors like Sarah Gordy have helped to push the boundaries - but it has taken an enormous amount of resource to get one or two actors to be known. There is more acceptance of learning disabilities in our society today compared to 20 or 30 years ago but I sometimes fear we are making very slow progress. What keeps me going are the changes I see in the groups and individuals who participate in this work; this is what inspires me and keeps me committed to achieving more and making change happen.

I recently worked with AbbottVision Production Company for Channel 4 on a new TV drama series which included many characters with Downs Syndrome and it was a very positive experience. AbbottVision were open to working in different ways to ensure it worked well and the characters the actors portrayed challenged the way people with Downs Syndrome are generally portrayed in TV shows. It did however make me realise how many barriers there are in terms of actors with learning disabilities accessing mainstream television work. Staff in the production company were anxious about 'getting it wrong' and were not always comfortable with communicating with someone with learning disabilities. We live in a word driven society and most people are not skilled in communicating non-verbally, a form of communication which is often more effective when working with actors with learning disabilities. One aspect of my role was to be an intermediary, 'translating' what the director wanted into communication which the actor could understand. The production company staff simply did not have the knowledge or skills to do this and how could we expect them to, given the focus on spoken or written modes of communication in our world?

How do you see the future for people with learning disabilities in acting and theatre?

I would like to see more actors with learning disabilities on TV and in mainstream theatre productions, but more importantly I think we need a paradigm shift in which 'theatre' embraces more diverse ways of creating and presenting work and different aesthetics. This will be a slow process but it is crucial people with learning disabilities are not only part of this process but are instrumental in driving it forward. Theatre can play such an important role in people's lives, helping them to identify what it is they want to do with their lives and providing a space for reflection and exploration of who they are and their place in the world. This is vitally important for people with learning disabilities and is one of the main drivers of the work I do.

My experience with *The Shysters* and its ending means I am keenly aware of the importance of not creating false hope. Acting is a very tough career choice for anyone, with or without disabilities. We have a responsibility towards the young people we work with not to raise expectations unrealistically. It is critical however that young people with learning disabilities who have real talent are supported and mentored and given opportunities to develop and achieve. However, we must be honest about the resources and time this takes currently. I have been working with a young male actor with learning disabilities since he was aged 10 and he is now working with me in an apprenticeship role. He is very talented and it has been a hugely rewarding experience, but it has required significant one to one mentoring and support and we need to ensure there are the resources in place to do this.

Do you have any thoughts on why progress has been so slow in terms of widening access to higher education for disabled young people in the performing arts?

Drama and acting courses at universities today are generally focussed on one kind of theatre making and this is one which is inaccessible to many groups. As I mentioned earlier, we need a paradigm shift in terms of how we define and think about theatre; to shift our notions of what theatre making is about. In addition, there are all the academic barriers which are put in place including the focus on the written and spoken word.

In Birmingham, we are looking at developing an MA with Birmingham School of Acting Applied Theatre Department aimed at emerging theatre practitioners working with young people with learning disabilities. We are also exploring the development of a two year accredited Performing Arts course for students with learning disabilities with a focus on ensemble work. I see such a course as vital not only in terms of providing a progression route for talented young people with learning disabilities but also as a tool for helping these students to determine what they want to do with their lives. It is not necessarily always about creating actors; it is about creating people who know what they want to do and equipping them with the skills to make it happen.

While I think the goal is for theatre courses in FE and HE to be inclusive, I think at this stage it is important we establish theatre courses which cater exclusively for students with learning disabilities. By working exclusively, we can draw out and explore the unique aesthetics of this work without it being dominated or over shadowed by a more mainstream way of working. The ultimate goal is that in the future people who do not have learning disabilities will choose to join a course with an inclusive focus because they are interested in exploring the different ways of making theatre which these courses offer.

What advice would you give to a talented disabled young person who wishes to pursue a career in theatre?

Support is essential to facilitate the process in the mainstream as there is a lack of understanding of working with people with learning disabilities. Find someone to mentor, guide and support you and who can help create opportunities for you. Find your networks, find your collaborators, research organisations and people who can help you navigate through the challenging world of theatre. Think carefully about whether pursuing a career in theatre is what you really want to do as it is such a tough world. Find opportunities to create work with other like-minded people so you can test out whether it is what you really want to do. Go and see as much theatre of different kinds as you can – find out what kind of theatre you like doing. Try not to see being on *Eastenders* or *Hollyoaks* as the summit of your career, as much as that would be a great achievement!

** Relaxed performances are designed to welcome groups like those with learning disabilities who may benefit from a more relaxed performance environment. Features include a more relaxed attitude to noise and movement in the theatre, comfortable seating areas immediately outside the auditorium as well as low level house lighting throughout the performance. Small changes may also be made to the lighting and sound effects.*