

Doing something is better than nothing

Robert S Gale

Oh gawd - it's him again! Harking on about equalities and those pesky disabled people! Yes - it is - strap in! Many of us working 'in equalities' have been doing this for quite a while now. In my case it's around twenty years. I feel waves of enthusiasm and despair - jeered on by the progress we've made and yet jaded by having some conversations that sound exactly the same as they did decades ago.

In 2005 I was the first Agent for Change in Scotland, working out of Birds of Paradise and reaching across the sector to look at how we can reduce the barriers preventing disabled actors from getting on to the mainstream stage. I met with many Scottish directors and other theatre leaders during this time and everyone wanted to get on board with this idea of an inclusive sector. In the 16 years since then we have seen positive steps and a few leaps, but we can all agree that there's still a long way to go.

Why do we feel like nothing has moved forward? We need to keep remembering that we absolutely have made progress - the National Theatre has had a disabled actor in at least one production of it's programme since it reopened post lockdown. In Scotland the number of opportunities and commissions available for disabled people is visibly higher than at any point in the past. And the number of disabled actors on TV - in soaps and in dramas as well as kids TV - has never been higher.

But we're all aware that we need to do more – disabled people make up 20% of the population so we're still massively underrepresented within Scottish culture. We - arts and culture organisations - have the ability and potential to keep pushing things forward. We've also got the obligation to do this. Yet it's all a bit scary – fear stops us from taking risks, as it has been doing at organisational, personal and political levels for millenia. No big surprise there!

EVERYTHING I'm saying here is specific to disability and equalities in theatre, yet at the same time it's about everything any organisation does. Of course you want to do your research, of course you should get advice from experts, but if these steps keep being put off and delayed, and if that becomes your reason for not moving forward, then you need to get unstuck.

What are the real risks of 'getting equalities wrong'? You could offend people - you might do something that really causes hurt and then people will know that you haven't got a clue what you're doing! But perhaps you already are causing hurt and offense - by doing nothing or the minimum required you are sending a strong message that disabled people or other groups just don't matter to you. I see some organisations acting as though keeping quiet is the best way to avoid problems - but silence sends a very strong message. If I go to a shop and there are steps with no signage pointing to a ramp then I presume the owner doesn't care – a simple sign saying 'If you need assistance, phone xxx' goes such a long way. It shows an awareness and a

willingness – silence shows the opposite.

We're all waiting until we know what the right thing to do is - until we've got the right skills and knowledge, until we've read the perfect case study and we therefore know we're able to 'do equalities' without making any mistakes. But **that's never going to happen** - we're always going to exclude some people and take some well-meaning step that ends up being 'wrong'. All of this applies to just about every area of organisational development - it's never been a mathematical equation - and yet when it comes to equalities this fear of doing the wrong thing paralyzes many.

People are quite often surprised when we admit this, but at Birds of Paradise we make mistakes frequently . We're seen as the 'disability equality experts' by some and yet we haven't found all the answers. We keep trying new things - sometimes they work and other times they really don't. The results of what we try are oftentimes somewhere in between. When we produced 'Wendy Hoose' by Johnny McKnight in 2014 with Random Accomplice we thought having the BSL interpreter on a TV in the bedroom set would be perfect - it fits in to the world of the play and means the two-hander sex comedy didn't need a third person on stage interpreting. But then for the second tour we went to bigger venues and the small TV screen was just too difficult for some Deaf people to see properly - it didn't allow some BSL users to understand what was going on. Some people loved it - others didn't - there was no consensus.

This particular example shows that our questions around accessibility and our questions around 'the art' often merge in to the same thing. At the end of the day we want our audience to be able to 'see' everything and 'hear' everything - I wouldn't ask an actor to deliver a monologue to the back of the stage as no one would be able to comprehend what's being said – making our work accessible to more people (it'll never be accessible to everyone) is just an extension of this.

I said earlier that back in 2005 everyone I spoke to was 'on board'. So why is it all still so difficult? Well, maybe it just is difficult - we're not going to solve systematic exclusion of disabled and Deaf people overnight. I'm also a bit less naive than I was 16 years ago - access is further up the priority list for some people than it is for others. But ultimately, if you want to employ a disabled actor or make your work more accessible to disabled audiences, you just have to do it. Do something, do anything, muck it up and do it better next time - just please don't do nothing.

Robert S Gale - OCTOBER 2021