

Unscene Suffolk: *Through the Magnifying Glass* Evaluation report

Background

Unscene Suffolk is a community theatre company of adults with visual impairment, founded in 2013. *Through the Magnifying Glass*, produced in 2015, was Unscene Suffolk's third project, and first co-production. Unscene Suffolk was one of three partners commissioned to create work as part of the New Wolsey Theatre's *Moving Stories* initiative, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn foundation. Additional funding came from Arts Council England and Suffolk Community Foundation (via the Suffolk Small Grants fund), and significant support-in-kind from the New Wolsey Theatre and Sensing Change.

Project content and implementation

Project concept and partnership with New Wolsey Theatre

The various starting points for the project are explained in Appendix 1: Programme notes. One key factor was the invitation from the New Wolsey Theatre to take part in *Moving Stories*, a project exploring notions of disability, isolation and belonging. This presented some challenges, as discussed in the programme notes, but also a fantastic opportunity for Unscene Suffolk to be billed alongside three well-known arts organisations, the New Wolsey, Pacitti Company and DanceEast. Having only been incorporated since late 2013 Unscene Suffolk were delighted to be part of the project in which all other partners were well-established Arts Council NPOs.



Production flier for *Through the Magnifying Glass*

Participants

15 visually impaired participants took part in *Through the Magnifying Glass*, with one dropping out prior to the final performances for personal reasons. This individual still contributed to the performance by pre-recording a sound file which was played during the show.

Participants ranged in age from early thirties to mid eighties, with over-55s making up over half the group. Given the connection between sight loss and aging, this was reflective of the makeup of the target group.

Although many group members were forced to miss some workshops for personal reasons, most attended regularly from January to July.

Staffing and Volunteers

All workshops were led by Jenni Halton, and an Assistant Facilitator, Steven Ockenden. Three volunteers trained in Community Sightguiding were provided by Sensing Change, and two more with theatre backgrounds joined the project later.

Volunteers' duties included meeting participants at bus stops and train stations, assisting with mobility and refreshments in the space, and other visual tasks such as describing visual elements of the work being shared. Where appropriate during the workshops, volunteers were encouraged to join in with creative exercises. During the performances, volunteers had specific responsibility for assisting participants backstage, helping with costume changes, and assisting visually impaired audience members. One volunteer with acting experience was cast in the show, covering the role of the participant who decided to drop out.

Phase 1: Ideas Development

Initial ideas for the production were explored over the course of four workshops at the end of 2014. Workshop content included:

- Shared reading of passages from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *Alice in Wonderland*
- Creating our own metaphors and stories linking experiences of sight-loss and shrinking
- Imaginative explorations of themes including inventiveness, perception, self-doubt, patience and other ideas found in Lewis Carroll's stories
- Sharing of personal experiences of disability, both positive and negative
- User-testing of tea and cake to design a tea party for the audience!

Following these initial workshops, Jenni and Steve compiled a storyboard linking together a series of scenes conceived by the group (or taken directly from *Alice*) and cast the show into 15 different characters.

Over a further 6 workshops in early 2015 these scenes were then improvised by the actors, in order to develop the characters and generate content for the script. These sessions were audio-recorded, allowing Jenni and Steve to lift lines directly from the improvisations during the process of scriptwriting.

The final script was presented to the cast in mid-March, around two months sooner than this has happened for previous projects, in response to requests from the group for this to happen.

While some minor changes were made after this date, it is a unique challenge for the company to try and have the script exactly as it needs to be from the beginning, as some group members learn their lines only from audio files, which cannot be easily edited between rehearsals.

Phase 2: Rehearsal and performance

Creative team

Jenni Halton led all workshops and directed the final performance, with Steven Ockenden assisting. A wider creative team, recruited prior to the commencement of Phase 2, was engaged to work on the performance in the following capacities:

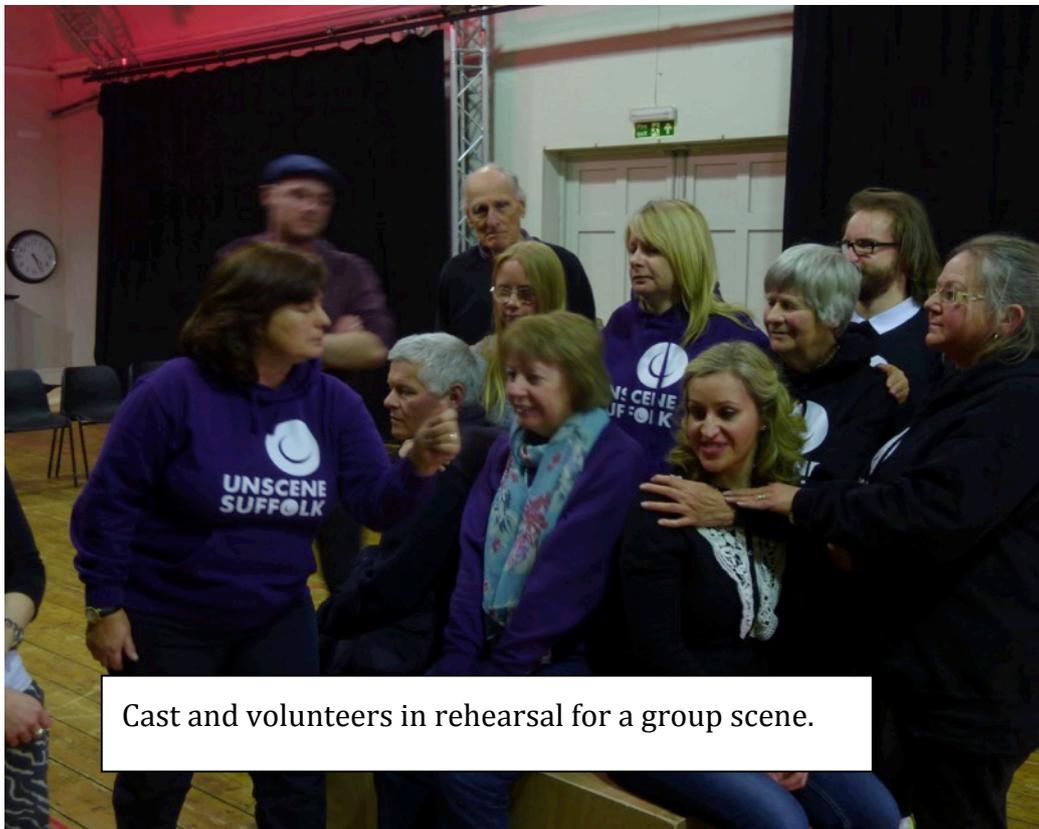
Amy Mallett – Musical Director and Composer

Julian Smith - Stage Manager

Danuta Tarbard – Costume Supervisor

Scripts and line-learning

Learning lines has always proved extremely challenging for some members of the group and this remained the case. However issuing the script early made a clear difference to some cast members, and those who have now performed with the group since its incarnation in 2013 were markedly more able in this respect – without exception - showing their ability to improve regardless of age or level of sight loss.



Cast and volunteers in rehearsal for a group scene.

Various methods were employed from large print scripts to screen-reader friendly email versions and CD recordings. The writers' knowledge of the cast enabled them to structure the script appropriately for individuals; for example casting an actor with a learning disability among a group of characters where he could be closely supported by others.

Style and aesthetics

Through the Magnifying Glass utilised an unconventional theatre setup, as has become a regular occurrence for Unscene Suffolk's productions. The performance took place in the High Street Exhibition Gallery, a large, versatile hall which was decorated with giant bunting as the audience were invited to the Mad Hatter's tea party. They sat at round tables – complete with tea and cake - in the centre of the room, and the action took place around all four sides of the space.

The setup was intended to be interesting for the audience, ensuring that nobody was 'at the back' at that blind audience members could get a better sense of the movement of actors in the space as the voices moved around them. It also worked well for the actors, who knew that by sticking to the sides of the room they could avoid ever straying into the audience, as may be one of the key problems for a blind actor performing on a conventional stage.



Movement sequence using wooden planks.

Audio description – for the benefit of visually impaired audiences – was integrated into the narration of the play, this year by all of the actors who formed a chorus of narrators. This meant that – more so than in previous years – most people were on stage most of the time, and there was a large amount of physical movement to be learnt as well as lines, which proved one of the biggest challenges of the rehearsal process. Many of the performers commented on this in their feedback and said they had felt daunted by the physicality of the show, but all felt that it has been successfully executed in the end. As part of this process lessons were also learnt about the types of movement that group members find easiest. The performance contained two songs with choreography, one of which involved the actors moving around while holding onto a set of wooden planks. The number was intended to look and feel chaotic, but proved the easiest piece of movement in the show for many, because once they had made physical contact with the plank, which

connected them to the other individuals also holding it, they could feel where the rest of the group were in the space and be guided as the group moved together. This is a valuable observation that will enable the group to create accessible movement sequences in the future.

Another achievement which built on feedback from previous years was that three cast members performed music in the show, two of whom had never done so before.

Performances

Three performances of *Through the Magnifying Glass* took place on 17 and 18 July 2015. The show played to a sold-out audience of over 140 people, a 40% increase on previous years. Data collected at the performances shows that new audience members were attracted via a workshop run by Unscene Suffolk at the recent RNIB forum in Ipswich, fulfilling a key aim of getting more visually impaired people to attend. A dozen or so children also attended, indicating that the well-known family-friendly basis of the play had an impact on audience numbers.

The performances went very smoothly and (unlike in previous years) the cast seemed to relax and become more confident, rather than more nervous, in front of an audience. Many audience members commented on how much individual cast members had improved since previous performances. All audience members were asked to fill in feedback forms. Comments included:



The cast in performance.

"Thought the performance was absolutely brilliant, the energy was just incredible."

"An unusual but very clever piece of writing and form of performance."

"Really good and we really enjoyed it. My husband found it to be accessible and loved the stories too (He is blind). Very well directed and performed."

"Stunning- Amazing contrast of humour with underlying themes. Truly Brilliant."

"Thought provoking; easy to relate the story to many disabilities."

"One of the best evenings I have had at the theatre. The cast were fantastic and the music was fantastic as well, made such a great effect being live."

“Adored it, love it, my face hurts from smiling. The descriptive bit seemed to add even more to an already beautiful show.”

The performance also received a review on the Ipswich Spy website, from which the following is extracted:

“Being told about the tea party theme and the possibility of a bunny rabbit suit, I imagined the play to be jovial and fun, and I wasn’t wrong. However the script was exceptionally written, creating a perfect balance between comedy and underlying themes of vulnerability in disability, without making the audience feel uncomfortable. Throughout the play, there were momentary pauses that complimented the script, in which pre-recorded voice clips of the cast members were played talking about their own experiences of vulnerability.... I have not a bad word to say about the performance, and can only congratulate those involved in creating such a beautiful and entertaining production while sharing such a resonating insight into... Sigh.”

Audience data was also collected and revealed the following:

- 10% of those who answered the survey were under 25, a significant increase on previous years. The remainder were spread roughly equally across the other age categories (26-40, 41-60 and over 60).
- 10% of those who answered the survey considered themselves to be blind or partially sighted, again a big increase.
- 13% of those who answered the survey said they ‘never’ usually go to the theatre.
- 100% said they would be interested in attending future performances by Unscene Suffolk.

Evaluation

Participant feedback was collected via a questionnaire which individuals were invited to complete either electronically or face-to-face with volunteer support. A mixture of open and closed questions were asked. 11 participants returned the questionnaire, out of 14 who completed the project.

Skills, Confidence and Achievements

All respondents felt that they had personally improved in some element of performing, and that the project helped Unscene Suffolk to develop or improve as a group. A number of people mentioned the peer support within the group:

“The best thing about the project was that we worked so well as a team and tried our hardest to help each other where needed.”

“I think we are aware of each others weaknesses and genuinely try to help and encourage the talents of others. We have formed friendships which are both professional and casual.”

A number of people mentioned feeling more confident in singing, and those who had played the keyboards felt this was a highlight of the project. These achievements reflect an increased emphasis on music, which was one of the artistic aims of the project.

Seven respondents said they felt that a lot was expected of them during the project, but this was generally viewed positively:

"I did feel a lot was expected of me during this project , but it gave me something to aim for. The project lived up to and beyond my expectations, I had thought at the beginning that your vision of so much movement and performing around people eating and drinking in the middle of us was a very big goal to set us, but I think it was absolutely brilliant and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to grips with it."

"There was a clear goal and we reached it. It was more complicated than previous shows but this made us work harder."

Responding to the brief

As indicated in the programme notes, we knew from the outset of the project that there were some careful decisions to be made about how to respond to the *Moving Stories* brief, which required us to produce a piece of work acknowledging, however subtly, the group's shared experience of living with disability. Overall, participant feedback shows that this was achieved in a way that did not undermine the group's wish to avoid being defined by their impairments. Nine respondents to the questionnaire said they felt ownership of the performance, and ten said that it was a good way to respond to the brief. A number of people commented, however, that we must be careful not to *only* make work about disability:

"There are times when I would like to do something totally unconnected with any disability. It is very necessary to make all forms of theatre accessible for disabled people but the subject matter need not be disabled related."

"We are a visually impaired theatre company making accessible work. But we need to make sure it doesn't become the only thing we make work about. It might not be what most audiences want to watch either. We don't want to be seen to 'bang the disability drum' too much".

These comments will be important in shaping our future creative planning, and indeed determining how often we choose to accept funding that stipulates disability-themed work.

Other benefits

The following comments showed the extent of the impact that taking part in the project had on people:

"As a member of the group I can honestly say it has been life-saving, it has given me something to look forward to, the group have become good friends and we work as a team, and Jenni and helpers are wonderful - nothing is too much trouble. I have noticed everyone in the group has gained confidence in the shows we have performed, I only hope this can continue, love it all."
(Participant aged 74)

"I love working with everyone and my confidence improves when in character. At times I feel as if I can see! I also feel in control of what I am doing, which makes such a nice change." (Participant aged 56)

"I am so glad I was able to take part in such a successful production with such a lovely bunch of friends, all inspired by such a creative and skilled leader. The response from the audience was something I will always remember." (Participant aged 82)

"It's been a huge honour being part of such a wonderful group. I feel like I have a new family. You have given me so much confidence that I'd once had, lost and now found again. I've never felt some of the feelings that I've had shooting though my veins the past few days. Wow." (Participant aged 31)

Areas for improvement

Responses to the questionnaire revealed the following areas for improvement or consideration in future.

- the need for more tuition in different acting methods and characterization
- the importance of making work on a variety of themes (not just disability) in the future
- some of the oldest group members found the chorus work tiring and require more time off stage during the performance
- the ongoing need to ensure that all cast members are supported to learn lines with plenty of time to spare and appreciate the impact of this on the group dynamic

Jenni Halton
Workshop Leader, Unscene Suffolk
September 2015

Appendices:

1. Programme notes
2. Press review

Appendix 1, programme notes: Unscene Suffolk and the New Wolsey Theatre present 'Through the Magnifying Glass'

Through the Magnifying Glass had many starting points. Unscene Suffolk was approached by the New Wolsey Theatre to take part in *Moving Stories*, a project exploring the oral histories of local disabled people. We were asked to create a piece of theatre about experiences of belonging as a disabled person in the community. This was hard for us because we have always resisted the idea of making work that is 'about disability' – our members do not want to be defined by their visual impairment - but we are grateful to the Wolsey for giving us the freedom to interpret the brief in our own way. We knew that we wanted to create something playful and fantastical, and that the best way for a theatre company to speak about themselves, or about disability, is to make a great piece of theatre, which positively demonstrates who we are and how we belong in the community.

I had also observed some time ago the group's love affair with tea breaks, and promised them that one day we could make a show all about tea and cake. We began to think about famous tea parties and did not take long to settle on the *Alice* stories – celebrating their 150th anniversary this year - as a perfect match for both Unscene Suffolk and the *Moving Stories* project. The more we read of Lewis Carroll's books, the more parallels we discovered with people's lived experiences of visual impairment, and of life in general.

These many starting points have led us to create a piece that has many characters, many stories, and many messages within it. Our members, after all, have countless diverse experiences as well as shared ones. We have thoroughly enjoyed sharing our stories and creating the show, and we are thrilled to be partners in this exciting project alongside DanceEast and Pacitti Company.

Jenni Halton, Director

Written by Jenni Halton, Steven Ockendon and the cast / Director & Producer - Jenni Halton / Musical Director & Composer – Amy Mallett / Assistant Facilitator – Steven Ockendon / Stage Manager – Julian Smith / Costumes – Danuta Tarbard / Sound recordists – Livid Films

Cast:

Alex 1 / Foxglove – Justin Ballantyne
Alex 2 / Tigerlily – Maggie Davy
Alex 3 / Thistle – Fran Ling
Mad Hatter / Optician – Julie Bennett
March Hare / Cousin Harry – Stuart Turner
Knight / Father – David Appleton
Dormouse / Aunt Doris – Denise Tillier
Maximus / Grandfather – Jim Whyte
Sheep / Mother – Pam Rivers
Tweedle Dum / Milly – Carolyn Allum
Tweedle Dee / Tilly – Clare Burman
Tweedle Two / Billy – Wayne Witney
Tweedle Three / Smudge – Mark Conquer
Gnat / Natalie – Caroline Giddings
White Cane Rabbit / Stanley – Vince Ridgewell
Additional voice recordings – Kim Clifton

Music performed by:

Amy Mallett
Hannah Garnham
Will Cahill
Mark Conquer
Wayne Witney
David Appleton

Volunteers:

Juliette Aylett
Anne Altria
Gill Cook
Beverly Levy
Annie Perez
Michael Storey
Stuart Turner
Kelly Will

Thanks to:

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Appendix 2: Press Review:

<http://ipswichspy.com/what-s-on/theatre/item/3557-review-through-the-magnifying-glass>

So this weekend I went to see a show called 'Through the Magnifying Glass' written by Jenni Halton and performed by Unscene Suffolk; a local drama group consisting of 20 or so blind or partially sighted people. A few of the cast are regulars in the pub I work in, so of course I agreed to support them by going along, really not sure what to expect.

Having been involved in a few local 'am-dram' groups in my time, I'm aware of how much work and effort goes into a conventional performance, let alone one catering for such a prominent disability.

The play was performed at the 'HEG' - the High Street Exhibition Gallery in Ipswich. The hall was arranged like tea party, each table laden with cakes, and tea and coffee provided on entry. Amongst the audience were a few blind/partially sighted people, and I can't deny being curious to know what their experience of the play would be like.

Any kind of apprehension I had soon vanished as the play began. The dialogue was clearly presented by the cast, with the stage prompts casually being intertwined into the script, to cater for everyone in the audience. Being told about the tea party theme and the possibility of a bunny rabbit suit, I imagined the play to be jovial and fun, and I wasn't wrong. However the script was exceptionally written, creating a perfect balance between comedy and underlying themes of vulnerability in disability, without making the audience feel uncomfortable. Throughout the play, there were momentary pauses that complimented the script, in which pre-recorded voice clips of the cast members were played talking about their own experiences of vulnerability.

The theme of the play was loosely based on Alice and Wonderland, and the idea of being trapped the 'other side of the looking glass'. I also noticed influence of the Wizard of Oz, as the lead character returned to his family at the end of the play, characters who resembled personalities represented the 'other side of the looking glass' throughout the play.

I have not a bad word to say about the performance, and can only congratulate those involved in creating such a beautiful and entertaining production while sharing such a resonating insight into... Sight.

Ipswich Spy, Theatre News.

- See more at: <http://ipswichspy.com/what-s-on/theatre/item/3557-review-through-the-magnifying-glass#sthash.qDRJ8bb6.dpuf>