

Unscene Suffolk: *The Greatest Show That Never Happened*

Evaluation Report

Background

Unscene Suffolk is a community theatre company for adults with visual impairment, founded in 2013. The *Greatest Show That Never Happened*, produced in 2018, was the company's sixth production. The project was funded by Santander Foundation, The Big Lottery (Awards for All) and Suffolk Community Foundation through the Joy Abbott Fund, David and Jill Simpson Fund and Suffolk Giving Fund. The project also received support-in-kind from the New Wolsey Theatre and Sensing Change.

Project content and implementation

Project concept

The starting point for the project was to utilise the theme of the music hall and variety in order to provide a platform for all participants to showcase their various talents, and to give them an opportunity to contribute whether in terms of musical ability, comedy writing or acting and singing. It was also hoped that this format would allow further opportunities for music and movement. Initially the idea was to simply have a traditional music hall framework and produce a series of 'acts' introduced by a compere. However, once ideas began to evolve, the group felt based on previous experience, that they would work more effectively with a stronger narrative and so the idea of staff in a theatre having to perform a show when the real acts fail to arrive was decided upon. This concept allowed for an 'improvised' feel to the production which would prove to be both a challenge to the performers but also a benefit as it would tie in with the 'community' style of performance.

Participants

14 visually impaired participants took part in *The Greatest Show That Never Happened*. This included two new participants who, whilst joining after some of the development work and scriptwriting had been done, were able to be written into the production where possible and make a valuable contribution to the piece. Around half of the group were aged 55 or over. Although various group members were forced to miss some workshops for personal reasons, most attended regularly from January to October. One group member who was unable to perform in the show took on a writing role, scripting a melodrama and running a workshop with the group to cast and develop her idea, which was a popular part of the final production.

Staffing and volunteers

All workshops were led by facilitator and project leader, Jenni Elbourne. Caroline Roberts was retained as Assistant Facilitator. Four volunteers supported the workshops and performances.

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 elements of the work being shared. Where appropriate during workshops, volunteers were encouraged to join in with the creative exercises. During the performances, volunteers had specific responsibility for assisting participants backstage, helping with costume changes, and assisting visually impaired audience members. Volunteers also assisted with scene changes due to the episodic nature of the production.

Phase 1: Ideas Development

Initial ideas for the production were explored in workshops during the winter of 2017-2018. Workshop content included:

- An exploration, via sharing of memories and listening to old recordings, of traditional music hall and variety acts.
- Discussion of topical themes and issues of the current day and how these could be presented in the music hall style. These included the NHS, Brexit, buses, and other issues specific to people with visual impairment, such as obstructions on pavements etc.
- Devising spoof 'acts' based on traditional variety acts, such as a compere, clairvoyant, stand-up comedy, melodrama.



1: 'Junk orchestra' samba workshop

- Shared reading of the *The Red Barn*, a Victorian melodrama with a local history connection. This was subsequently written as a 2-act scene by group member Julie Bennett, workshopped by the group and performed in the final production.
- Visits from Nathan Geering of Rationale Method, who led two movement workshops with the aim of promoting members' confidence in movement and adding a dance element to the music hall format.
- A visit to Ipswich Art gallery to workshop ideas around the 'You Are Here! The Making of Ipswich' exhibition. This also promoted an understanding of music hall and variety in the local area.
- Working with musical director Amy Mallett to create musical sections with a 'junk orchestra'.

Following these initial workshops, Jenni worked with group members Julie Bennett (an ex-drama teacher with experience of mounting community performances) and Clare Burman, both of whom have previously contributed to writing scripts and who wished to be involved once again. Assistant Facilitator, Caroline Roberts also contributed to the writing of the script. A list of scenes was collated, based on those already devised during workshops, and other possible scenes which would fit in with the 'putting on a show when the real

performers haven't arrived' narrative. This format allowed for a non-linear structure and an even spread of parts for all group members.

The three main writers worked together to create a storyboard from the scenes outlined. In addition, group member, Kevin, contributed a section of stand-up comedy and a topical song based on a well-known children's rhyme which he had written independently. New group member Paul contributed a short scene he had written for his character and which was worked into a larger piece. Group member Wayne contributed a short scene and also wrote a song which he performed in the final show. Other group members also got the opportunity to play their own musical instruments in the production, thus developing the musical element of the show compared with previous projects.

The final script was presented to the cast during May and June 2018 and distributed in a range of accessible formats for all cast members to begin learning their lines.

Phase 2: Rehearsal and Performance

Creative team

Jenni Elbourne led the majority of workshops and directed the final performance, with Caroline Roberts assisting and leading as required. 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
Silki Morrison – Stage Manager
Danuta Tarbard – Costume Supervisor

Scripts and line-learning

Having worked with this more traditional format previously, members of the group were able to manage the learning of lines quite effectively. Whilst the spread of lines was fairly equal among the cast, a couple of members had larger chunks of dialogue due to the nature of the 'acts', such as the clairvoyant scene. Other members of the group provided support and advice to assist in learning lines. The 'impromptu performance' nature of the show did allow for some ad-libbing which presented both a challenge and a help to the group.

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 instance casting an actor with particular physical health issues in roles where their on-stage time is minimised or staged to allow them to be seated.

Style and aesthetics

The Greatest Show That Never Happened was the first time Unscene Suffolk had expanded its usual one-act performance to a full two-act production with an interval. This was made possible due to the longer rehearsal period which an October production date provided. It

did however prove challenging once the group entered the final stage of rehearsals, and this is explained in the next section.

Having worked with a conventional theatre set-up previously, the group was at ease with this format, and it allowed some group members to rest between scenes. However, it did provide challenges with regard to making sure that everything that happened backstage was as tightly choreographed as what happened on stage. Fortunately, issues which arose in previous productions were addressed and, thanks to our calm and dedicated backstage team, all performances ran smoothly.

As always Unscene Suffolk were concerned that the show should remain highly accessible. Once again we offered a touch tour for every performance, which our members enjoyed taking part in. The set was our most elaborate to date, with the back wall of the stage designed to look good to a sighted audience while also incorporating tactile posters to assist the cast in orientating themselves on stage. This offered audience members taking part in the touch tour a more sensory experience too. Each performance was also audio-described and one performance was BSL interpreted.

Performances

Three performances of *The Greatest Show That Never Happened* took place on 13th and 14th October 2018. 140 tickets were sold. This was below our target of 200 and was due in some part to the issues acknowledged in the 'Areas for improvement' section of this report.



3: Production photos: fake clairvoyant



2: Production photos: Melodrama

Audience members were asked to complete feedback forms. There were some exceptionally positive comments:

"I think it's wonderful to have projects and charities like this existing! It brings people together for peer to peer support as well as a great and positive environment to achieve goals and feel fulfilled and part of something that brings smiles and laughter to those involved and their audiences. Thank you!"

“These folk are amazing - what they achieve is fantastic. It benefits them so much and we all enjoy the performance.”

“You can see everyone has worked hard. Anything is possible - whatever your disability. Brilliant - absolutely brilliant.”

“Yet another totally different production.”

“It was really good I enjoyed it. The melodrama made me sad - perhaps a sequel where she doesn't die but he gets flushed! Isaac age 8: it was awesome, I hope I can come again, thank you!”

“I know how very important it is to the cast. They put their heart and soul into every minute and it shows. More please.”

Audience data was also collected and revealed the following:

15% of those who answered the survey were under 25, 17% were aged 26-40, 23% 41-60, and 45% aged over 60.

11% of those who answered the survey considered themselves to be blind or partially sighted – much higher than the proportion of people registered blind or partially sighted in the population as a whole (around 0.005%).

17% of those who answered the survey said they go to the theatre less than once a year, or ‘never’.

Evaluation

Participant feedback was collected via evaluation workshops. Some themes stood out among these comments.

1. Confidence with Movement

Group members responded generally positively to the increased focus on movement in this production, through the workshops with Nathan Geering of Rationale Method. A survey of the group's confidence levels in movement conducted prior to the first workshop with Nathan in March and again at the end of the project recorded an increase in the average self-assessment score from 3.5 to 7.1 out of 10.

“I loved the singing and dancing and just moving and knowing the words and jigging about, I loved it. It just made me feel thoroughly happy through and through!”

“I never thought I could do dancing because I don’t see the way other people do it, and yet going through the steps the way that we were doing made it so possible, and I thoroughly enjoyed being able to do that.”



5: Performing a self-penned song



4: Fosse style dance with white canes

2. Artistic Ownership

Several group members contributed material to the production and this was recognised. One member, Wayne, reflected that he had been talking about writing a scene for years and was very satisfied to have achieved this.

“I liked having the idea, writing the script and then writing the song that went along with it. Even after it was edited to fit into the show I still felt like that bit of the show was “mine.” Every time we rehearsed it and going out on stage to do it I thought “this is my thing.””

The ‘improvised’ nature of the production also gave the cast the opportunity to strengthen their acting abilities by allowing them to ad-lib on occasions and support one another if lines went awry. The group reflected how any mistakes were made part of the show. It was further reflected how this increased the cast’s confidence and sense of achievement in working together as a team just like any non-visually impaired group of actors.

“There were many times that different people were supporting other people. You know when you can help somebody or when to just give them a moment to cover themselves”

“The moment when Maggie said ‘don’t go, you’ve got another line’ was one of my favourite moments of the last six years of doing this, because when I first met Maggie, I can’t imagine she ever would have done that. It’s such a hard thing to do on stage, to find the moment where you can spontaneously snap out of your character and get the whole room in hysterics. It’s a real skill!”

3. Accessibility

An evaluation of the devices which had been put in place to ensure accessibility for the cast both onstage and backstage suggested that the use of a tactile set and a rope light placed along the front of the acting area were improvements which the cast found advantageous. 12 out of 13 cast members were able to detect the rope light (including some who had no other useful vision) and it was agreed that this device would definitely be used again.

Backstage the implementation of a white handrail running along the back of the set allowed cast members to find their own way to the stage. With some initial guidance, some group members were also able to make their way from their seat to the handrail, thus allowing them greater independence. For this production, rather than the traditional 'blacks', all backstage helpers wore white t-shirts to enhance visibility for those participants with useful vision. Further improvements were discussed and a floor mat was suggested as an addition to rope markers, to allow people more freedom and confidence with movement on stage.

The group also shared ideas for technological devices which can assist with accessibility for learning lines. As an addendum, the group is now liaising with VisionAids who have offered to visit and give expert assistance with line-learning technology.

"The back of the set being tactile worked brilliantly for me."

"That's quite important to me, to be able to try and be as independent on stage as possible. [The helpers] are lovely but the more independent I can be the better for me."

"The thing I liked about coming off stage was that if you couldn't see where you were going [because of the darkness and stage lights], suddenly this hand would come out and I'm so glad of that because I didn't know where I was going!"

4. Other benefits

A number of people talked about how involvement in the workshops impacts on their life outside the drama group.

"The whole group is like a big family, who all gel together and help each other out, I think it is wonderful."

"I probably wouldn't have been sitting there facilitating an RNIB course without coming here to Unscene Suffolk.... Doing this helped me to be able to talk to people and not be shy about addressing a group because it's a similar situation. For me this last show that we did, because the character was really overconfident, that gave me confidence."

"One of the reasons why I as a helper will go on as long as I can because I see how much these guys get out of it and it's absolutely inspiring to see people growing, being more confident, getting out, running quizzes, meeting at pubs. Things you would never have dreamed of doing before. It's a great pleasure to see it all."

“Yes, it’s helped me with my mental health, so I have been very grateful to everybody from that point of view.”

Participants were also surveyed for wellbeing measures during a post-production workshop, with 12 out of 13 members stating that they felt proud of their contribution and happier and closer to others as a result of the workshops. 8 participants felt that they had contributed ideas to the production, felt more useful and more satisfied with life in general, and that attending the workshops helped them deal with problems outside of the group.

Areas for improvement

One area for improvement that was identified during evaluation was the management of time and material. Because of a later production date, the project was developed over a period of one year and this allowed us time to generate more material and offer a two-act show. However, once in the final few weeks of rehearsal it was difficult to complete a run-through of the whole show within a workshop session. Other limitations imposed by the cost and availability of the venue meant that it was difficult to balance rehearsal time with a need to maximise actual performances. Whilst some people enjoyed participating in a longer show, others found it tiring.

“When you’ve got longer you can make more material, but you’ve got to live within your means a bit. We had to push through the whole show in our town hall rehearsals or else we would’ve got to production week and had bits of it we’d not done for three weeks. I found that difficult.”

“I loved the fact that the show was longer. Because it always seems to be over really quickly and I just want to do it again.”

“People like myself who struggle with health issues; on those long days it is really tough because I have to allow food breaks.”

Another area identified as a learning experience was ticket sales. The ticket income targets for this production were missed in part due to issues around box office and ticketing at our chosen venue. We received less support from our venue than in previous years, perhaps mainly because the venue is not used as a theatre space or for this kind of work regularly. Verbal feedback from audience members suggests that there were conflicting messages between the venue’s various shared box office provision, as well as confusion over what constituted a concession, with this category ultimately accounting for approximately 50% of our sales, further reducing the income generated.

Having been able to rely previously on a venue’s own front of house staff, we did not have a staff member or producer dedicated to overseeing the front of house and audience side of things. This resulted in crew and volunteers feeling divided between managing front of house and making the show happen. If we choose to work at a venue like this again we will allocate somebody to this role.

Despite these issues we got on well with our main contacts at the town hall who have taken our feedback on board to improve their own service in future. The technical staff in particular went out of their way to make sure we had the best experience possible.

The largest audience attended the Saturday afternoon performance, and some feedback suggested there were issues with sound, perhaps due to the acoustics of the space which seemed to make it more difficult to hear the actors voices when there was a larger audience. The group in fact found that the smaller audiences were more responsive and seemed to connect more easily with them, therefore, the lower audience numbers at the other performances did not impact on morale or the cast's sense of achievement.

Phase 3: Reflection and legacy

Following the performance a handful of workshops took place in autumn 2018 during which participants were able to reflect on the performance, and begin exploring ideas for the next project which will build on the skills developed during this project. Some of the above data was collected during this final phase, as well as ideas for our next project which will start in early 2019.

Caroline Roberts,

Workshop Assistant, Unscene Suffolk

December 2018