Limitless: autism and drama classes


The partnership came about through isolated conversations between the organisations about other projects. These conversations led us to collectively recognise our shared interest in, and commitment to, developing a framework for the engagement of autistic people in creative activity as artists, audiences and participants.

We have made a commitment to work together over the next five years to test the boundaries of our understanding of the potential of a creative autistic life, and challenge barriers that autistic people of all ages face when engaging in drama and theatre, as performers or audience members.

Workshops for autistic children and young people

In 2016 we undertook a pilot phase of Limitless which explored good practice in using drama and theatre methodologies with autistic children, teenagers and young adults.

We held three workshops which aimed to:

- build skills and confidence for artists and staff in the engagement of autistic individuals in creative workshops and in the delivery of professional drama productions and curriculum.
- develop a range of methodologies to engage autistic individuals across a series of ages, devising drama and text approaches: try, test and evaluate.
- test interest in and approaches to engagement of autistic individuals in developing work that tells their stories through creative writing, performance and collaboration.
The Reason I...

A workshop for young autistic adults which developed approaches, expertise and performance ideas to inform a future production of The Reason I Jump, a book by Japanese teenager Naoki Higashida on an autistic life.

The workshop addressed issues such as:

- Do autistic young adults want to explore autism as the subject of an artwork? What might the benefits of this be?
- How might the experience of being autistic be communicated through different media and art forms?
- Who might this artwork be ‘for’? Autistic people or a general public? Does this make a difference?

The Arrival

The Arrival worked with five participants aged 14-18 years in partnership with Hope for Autism in Airdrie. The workshop was based on ‘The Arrival’ by Shaun Tan, an illustrated, wordless novel which focuses on a man leaving his family to travel to a new, unfamiliar world.

The central themes of the novel are:

- leaving home
- arriving in a strange land
- migration
- being truly heard

These had the potential to resonate with the real world experiences of the group and allowed the focus of the learning for the teenage participants to appeal to their lived experiences of being heard or misheard, understood or misunderstood.

Under the Sea

Working with a class of 24 children aged 7 to 11 years from the Isobel Mair School East Renfrewshire, this workshop was an introduction to musical theatre through sensory experiences for autistic children, employing the theme ‘under the sea’.

The secondary theme was to create a safe and inspirational place for participants and staff to develop their relationship, including the relationship between carer and participant. Throughout the three days participants were exposed to various drama exercises based around three senses: sight, sound and touch.
Outcomes

We have produced best practice guidelines from each of the workshops, with key advice such as:

- Don’t make too many assumptions about what participants will or won’t be like. Each are individual with different needs and interests.
- Be flexible in your plan - think about the first session being a way of getting to know the level of the group in terms of confidence and experience.
- Take time to ensure that participants are comfortable, and that their individual needs are being met. For example if you are going to play a piece of music, work with the participants to set a noise level that everyone is happy with.
- Provide the class with as much information as possible prior to the workshops. What will you be doing? Who will be there? Try to be specific and avoid uncomfortable surprises.
- Make it a high priority to leave time in the session for recap and reflection. Think of the end of the day as 'completing the circle'

We learned that there is a great hunger for drama and theatre activities, not only from autistic participants but also their teachers and carers, who would like these activities to be a regular offer. There was also a great appetite from drama practitioners and artists to continue working in partnership with autistic people in the development of new projects and performance ideas.

The pilot has given everyone involved, from staff at the partner organisations, to the freelance artists and teachers, greater confidence in working with autistic people.

The pilot also allowed us to test our organisations’ three way partnership, from which we have established that by joining forces we can create holistic approaches to support the development of autistic people as practitioners, participants, artists and audiences. Later this year will work together to research and design an Autistic Youth Theatre for piloting by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2018.

‘For autistic people, talking about their experiences and coping mechanisms is in itself hugely valuable, but to be able to present that as a creative piece is hugely important and powerful.’ Dave Martin – Artist

‘An environment where I can create and be free, it feels like home. This is definitely the place I want to be. I’m going to unleash my creativity. That’s who I am, what I like to do.’ Calum Macritchie – Participant

‘It’s been quite surprising for me, to see some of the kids joining in with things I thought they would never join in with.’ Amy Coghlan – Session Worker and Volunteer: Hope for Autism
Further information

Evaluation of the pilot, including film work and best practice guides are available on our Limitless website.