

ACCESS ALL AREAS (London)

Challenging perceptions about theatre made with and for people with disabilities

ACCESS ALL AREAS MAKES URBAN, DISRUPTIVE PERFORMANCE BY LEARNING DISABLED AND AUTISTIC ARTISTS. THE COMPANY BELIEVES PASSIONATELY IN THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING LEARNING DISABLED ARTISTIC VOICES AT ALL LEVELS OF SOCIETY, TO HELP CREATE AN ARTS COMMUNITY THAT IS MADE MORE VIBRANT, MORE VARIED AND MORE RELEVANT BY INCLUDING A FULL RANGE OF DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CULTURE.

Formed in 1976 by Elsie Pilbeam, the company was originally called 'The Rainbow Theatre Group', a project of Hoxton Hall (a community centre and performance space in east London). Between 1976 and 2007, 63 shows were devised and performed by the group.

When in 2007 Hoxton Hall lost its arts funding, Rainbow was rebranded as Access All Areas, with Nick Llewellyn becoming its first artistic director. For four years the new company operated on a project funding basis, with little infrastructure, serving a group of 20 members through a weekly workshop but then in 2011, with support from a Big Lottery's Reaching Communities grant, a 5-year business plan was devised and the company embarked on a process of strategic development. This resulted in the professionalisation of services, building and developing capacity and infrastructure. In 2018 Access All Areas was recognised by the Arts Council England and received funding under the National Portfolio. This work also led to other funding and grants, resulting in a full programme of award-winning immersive theatre, participatory projects, the devising and delivering of the Performance Making Diploma at the Central School of Speech and Drama and to the company becoming a casting agency for people with disabilities (in partnership with leading casting agency Simon & How) and to the establishment of a consultancy and training agency working with people with learning disabilities and autism.

Crucially, all of this work is co-created by people with learning disabilities, which means their voice is authentically heard.

The different strands of the Access All Areas model are symbiotic. The Performance Making Diploma produces a pool of talented actors who go on to form the performance company and create epic shows. This in turn creates a talent pool for the casting agency as well as engages audiences, and most importantly challenges perceptions about theatre made with and for people with disabilities. By



demonstrating both sector leadership and producing great art, Access All Areas has built significant brand equity, which enables it to deliver quality training and consultancy services that adds unique value. The artistic vision going forward is to create one immersive, large-scale theatre show, with a big wrap-around outreach programme, once every two years.

Alongside the artistic programme, Access All Areas advocate for their constituency. For instance, only 4% of project grant applications to Arts Council England are made by disabled artists. To help address this, Access All Areas will support artists during three research and development projects with partner The London Theatre Consortium in the creation of their own independent work and in making applications.

Access All Areas are now both experts in their field and sector change-makers, demonstrating leadership in their chosen area. Nick Llewellyn:

First and foremost, your company needs to be making really great art, and you must have a really clear methodology for all of your activity. Access All Areas has a clear rationale for each strand of activity and how we contribute to the overall mission of including learning disabled artistic voices at all levels of society. Follow your gut instincts. Trust your knowledge and intuition as an expert and test your assumptions through action rather than standard desk or market research alone.

Know your business plan inside out. Although you take a strategic role as a leader, attention to detail is key. Hone good storytelling skills and be prepared to defend every aspect of your decision-making with evidence and data.

It's not just about earning money, it's about becoming leaders in best practice.