Welcoming Everyone to Your Theatre: An Accessibility Guide

by Jon Skaalen

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When we put on a play at our community theatre, we want everyone to come and see it – our family, our friends, co-workers, classmates, fellow church-goers, …. We want to bask in the praise and critical acclaim of everyone! But we recognize that a lot of people from our community never appear in our audiences or on our stages. One of the things we have to find out is what we can do to bring those people into the theatre-loving fold.

If Grandpa is losing his hearing and can't understand what we say on stage, have we equipped our auditorium with an Assistive Listening System he can use alone or with his hearing aid?

If Aunt Bea now uses a wheelchair, can she get into our theatre? Can she shake hands with the box office manager? Use the restroom? Sit with the rest of us? Even get on the stage?

If a blind boy has a great voice, can he join the quartet, get the music and words, and enter into all the stage movement? If a teenager with Down syndrome has tremendous enthusiasm but can't be understood clearly, can we find a way for her to participate as cast, crew and/or friend? If ol' Jon can no longer remember lines to save his soul, dare we put him into the cast? How are we going to be able to accommodate and welcome all these people into our theatre family? Without going broke?

How much will it cost for us to be accessible in our buildings and programs, where can we get the money, and – the key -- will we make accessibility a priority?

Set this priority NOW because it's the right thing to do, not because blind customers are suing corporations who have inaccessible websites and your theatre website may be next on the firing line. *Do it because sharing a tremendous performance with a friend and both loving it is a supreme experience* – whether our differences or similarities are vision, hearing, ethnicity, age, gender or ways of being mobile – SUV, stroller, sport wheelchair, walking stick, white cane or service animal. Do it now because we will all sooner or later need assistance in getting to the theatre or in enjoying it as much as we used to, and the sooner we provide for universal access, the better it will be when *we* need it.

Where To Start?

Become ADA-savvy. Individuals or theatre board members probably don't have to read the entire Americans with Disabilities Act, but you can get summaries or take classes on the key aspects of the ADA that are likely to affect your theatre. You can (or must, depending on your budget) designate an ADA Coordinator who will be your point person in learning the law and understanding "best practices" of accessibility.

The Rehab Act and the ADA -- The United States has 54 million citizens with disabilities. Organizations that receive government funding are required to provide accessible programs and services under Sections 503 and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Accessibility provisions are extended to the private sector in the 1990 Americans with Disability Act (ADA), which helps guarantee persons with disabilities employment and the right to enter the economic, social and cultural mainstreams. The ADA goes well beyond federally funded organizations to encompass private sector entities that serve the public, including cultural organizations that do not receive federal support, retail businesses, movie theatres, and restaurants.

Set a Board Policy on accessibility. It can start out simple: XYZ Theatre embraces the spirit of the ADA in choosing to make our performances, programs and services accessible to persons with disabilities. We believe it is important to assure that all members of our community can participate as fully as possible in our activities.

Appoint an Access Committee. Consider people from the community with different disabilities who know from experience what will work for them, what slope is too steep, what type is too small, what meeting rooms aren't accessible. They can advise your board and artistic staff and help you attract their communities. Beware: one blind person can't speak for the entire disabled community, nor can one person in a wheelchair or wearing a hearing aid. This is one group of "experts" who must be diverse and must look at any architectural plan and find its access flaws, just as your technical theatre staff must look at and fix what an architect doesn't know about day-in, day-out operation of a theatre.

Develop an Access Plan that looks at your annual program and facilities. Fill out a survey that will help you see what's good, what's not, and what you want to improve next year. Review and update the Access Plan annually. By having a realistic plan that recognizes rather than ignores potential issues and costs, you can recommend to the board how to budget funds to cover those possible expenses. What are your needs? An elevator to the green room or the balcony, a ramp into the lobby, or a lift onto the stage? If you anticipate that several Deaf patrons will need American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at several events in the year, plan how to pay the

Ken Moses

Local playwrights can create parts taking advantage of any actor's abilities. Whenever Frances Looks Up, a Minnesota state festival entry by Carol Hough, was a journey of encounters with intriguing characters with and without disabilities.

$200 or more it costs per show. If a Deaf student wants to take a ten-week acting class, imagine how you can make that work and how much it will cost. If you have been offering an ASL-interpreted show for a few Deaf patrons but haven't served your blind patrons, explore training or hiring of an Audio Describer who can make a performance come alive by giving blind patrons a feel for the visual activity onstage, the nods, the colors, the shapes, the actions that aren't apparent in the dialogue. Offer to make the playbill in larger print or Braille or in email, and you will make his or her entertainment experience a better one.

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Movement exercises, patiently directed, can help potential performers of any experience or ability grow individually and as a unique ensemble.

Be reasonable. If you can make a "reasonable accommodation" to serve the needs of a patron with a disability, that's what you need to do. However, what is reasonable to a theatre with a budget of $500,000 a year may not be as reasonable to one with a budget of $3,000 a year.

Hire staff and directors who value the importance of inclusion and know, or will learn through your training budget, what to do if a person with a disability comes to auditions, or won't be afraid to test traditional casting barriers if there's a chance to make our shows even better.

Comparable quality – If costumes, lighting and sound are important to you and translate into a good show, they are also important to patrons with poor vision or hearing, but who can get similar understanding through access services. Remember that, just as there are great differences in the quality of actors, there are differences in theatrical interpreters, audio describers, captioners and the equipment they use. If you don't know ASL, it's of no value to say "the signing looks so smooth and beautiful." That may be, but can the Deaf patron understand the show as well as the hearing person? Is the Deaf person laughing at close to the same time as the hearing person? Is the blind person laughing at the visual joke? Is the hard-of-hearing person catching most of the dialogue? Hire the best service providers you can, and follow up with them and with your patrons to assure satisfaction.

In short, if you don't have an Access Policy, an Access Committee or an Access Plan, it's time to start. Now. These essential elements of accessibility will make you better able to respect, include and accommodate the full range of your audience members who may not have been able to attend in the past. You will, as a result, cultivate and harvest some of your most dedicated patrons and participants, making your theatre the true community asset it should be. ▪

Jon Skaalen is an AACT Board Member and a member of AACT's Advocacy Committee. For a sample Access Plan or other Q&A resources, contact Jon at jon.vsarts@bcmn.com or 800-801-3883, voice/tty.

A blind man walks into a bar….

You're a director at the Bozeman Bijou, auditioning a new musical adaptation of "Bedtime for Bonzo." A young blind man with a guide dog walks in and says, "We'd like to audition." What do you do?

(A) Ask if he'd like to read for a part, before you remember that you don't have any Braille or large print scripts on hand.

(B) Tell him to fill out an audition form "over there" for himself and for the dog, if it's auditioning, too. Remembering that he can't see the paper or where "over there" is, you assist him to a chair to fill in his answers on the form. You don't pet the dog. Or the actor.

(C) Ask how he would like to audition. He may have a prepared monologue or song. With guidance as to the stage layout, steps, curtains, chairs, etc., he and other actors may improvise a scene.

(D) If he provided advance notice that he was planning to audition, you may have e-mailed him one or two portions of the script, and he may have already memorized several parts.

(E) You direct him as you would any other actor, taking care that any visual directions are stated, not pointed (left, right, downstage, upstage).

(F) If he shows promise but you are unsure how to direct or choreograph him, discuss issues with him; if he has experience, he may know what techniques work. If he is inexperienced, you may be able to discover solutions together, as with any actor.

Accessibility Resources

* Accessibility issues can be addressed by regional Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs): www.adagreatlakes.org/Partners/regionalDBTACs.asp

* Download 12 key Disability Access Symbols at http://www.gag.org/resources/das.php or obtain Mac or PC floppy disk copies of all the symbols by contacting the Graphic Artists Guild Foundation at 212-791-3400

* Most states have VSA arts offices that promote greater access to the arts for people with disabilities. Affiliate web links are found at www.vsarts.org/x302.xml

* The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., coordinates a Cultural Arts Access Forum with a listserve that covers many accessibility topics. To subscribe, e-mail: culturalartsaccesssubscribe@yahoogroups.com.

* Audio Description International has a listserv discussing issues for blind patrons and audio describers: To subscribe, e-mail: ADInternationalsubscribe@yahoogroups.com and leave the subject line and message body empty. Its website is www.adinternational.org

* The Kennedy Center sponsors an annual LEAD (Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability) conference for ADA coordinators of arts organizations. The next conference will be in Minneapolis in August 2007. To receive information, contact access@kennedy-center.org

* For a good example of an "accessible" website, go to www.vsaartsmn.org. It was ranked the most accessible of about 45 websites surveyed at this year's LEAD Conference.