

## PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES TRAINING AS ACTORS IN THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES (CREATIVE RENEWAL)

In the UK, people with disabilities are under-represented in the cultural and creative industries and it is unlikely that the situation is much different in other Member States. People with disabilities lack both the professional training that caters for their needs and the opportunities to demonstrate their skills to potential employers. Graeae Theatre Company, which was one of the partners in an English DP called Creative Renewal, pioneered a training course for disabled actors, followed by a showcase event and a touring production.

The course, which was entitled "Missing Piece", comprised a 16 week training programme covering three main areas: Professional, historical and contextual studies; Performance skills; and Study skills and preparation for further training. Recruitment was by interview and audition and, of the 39 applicants, 12 were selected. Disability Equality Training and Deaf Awareness Training were provided to all trainees, tutors and staff. Access workers and communication support workers were employed to assist the trainees as required, and advice was made available on independent living and benefits. The trainees were fully involved from the outset of the programme, creating their own performances and participating in audits to ensure their needs were met. There was also ongoing monitoring, with trainees giving and receiving feedback on their progress throughout the course. Some sessions were filmed as an evaluation tool and as a record of achievement.

The showcase event was held at Royal Academy of Drama and Arts in July 2003 in front of an invited audience of 75 casting agents, theatre and TV directors, radio producers and arts professionals. Then, the production "Mother Courage and her Children" toured nine London venues in July 2003 to largely favourable press reviews and it was seen by around 800 people

The main outcome for the beneficiaries was that 12 disabled actors had been professionally trained and were given their first performance contract. They had also been able to show their skills to potential employers. This led to a number of short-term positions in mainstream theatres and Graeae's other productions. Two trainees undertook auditions for the BBC and an independent television company called Granada, and others continued their professional development with further training. A longitudinal study is being undertaken as part of Creative Renewal's transnational research to assess the long-term impact on a number of the beneficiaries.

Another significant impact was raising the profile of all disabled actors amongst employers. Producers and casting directors from BBC TV and radio, as well as theatre directors from Leicester Haymarket and Nitro, led workshops during the course on marketing and auditioning. The BBC now acknowledges that *"the number of people with disabilities that the company employs is low,"* and has recently announced its intention *"to use more disabled people in our television programmes."*

The principles underlying the project were continued by Graeae that developed an accredited course linked to a professional performance contract called Missing Piece 3. Aimed at disabled actors and would-be actors, it was a four month accredited programme run in collaboration with London Metropolitan University that had the principles of inclusion and access at its core.

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