

Case Study: The Super Special Disability Roadshow!

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Who are Birds of Paradise Theatre Company?

Birds of Paradise Theatre Company (BOP) is Scotland's preeminent disability-led theatre company that creates critically acclaimed touring theatre that also focuses on creatively embedded access (CEA). This means that every one of BOP's productions designs in access provision for people with access requirements who are often excluded from live theatre. This can include people who need captioning due to hearing loss, are excluded because they are British Sign Language (BSL) users and interpretation is limited, or because they do not have access to all the visual language on stage. BOP ensures that the captioning, BSL interpretation and audio description we provide is as exciting, innovative and artistic as all other elements of the production.

BOP periodically makes productions aimed at children and young people, and in 2021 we created the Super Special Disability Roadshow! (SSDR!)

What is the Super Special Disability Roadshow!?

The Super Special Disability Roadshow! (SSDR!) exists as a film and a live experience. The film tells the story of hosts Rob and Sal who are testing out Rob's new high-tech version of their theatre-in-schools education roadshow. Desperate to be 'down with the kids,' Rob embraces the digital era and things go well as they explore what it's like for disabled people in today's world. That is until the younger generation decides to set them straight!

In the live show, the film is presented by two live actors - one a pesky disruptive alien - who can interact with the audience around the film, and the other a young researcher. The live show gives the audience a chance to delve a little deeper into the stories and hear the experiences of the younger presenter. The journey of understanding that the alien goes on helps a wider audience to understand the experience of disabled people, and how different generations of disabled people feel about their identities. We do this with characteristic BOP humour, heart and honesty. SSDR! was made in Scotland, but the live show has been experienced right across the UK and as far afield as New Zealand and Hong Kong.

Who and what was involved in making it accessible?

SSDR! uses creatively embedded access to support storytelling. The show includes sign language interpretation, and we developed an innovative approach that allows the show to tour and use local interpreters with regional sign language accents. There are captions that are colour coordinated to each character that run across the live and film elements. Characters give audio descriptions of themselves, and we provide resources online for audiences, parents and schools, including a disability equality language toolkit. All resources are available at boptheatre.co.uk/schools-resources.

To ensure that a wide range of young people's voices were represented, we undertook a residency at an additional support needs (ASN) school, ran workshops for young disabled people, as well as working closely with Ollie and Oona, our two young cast members. All the stories told in SSDR! are people's own lived experience.

Why does this matter?

SSDR! is important because not enough theatrical work exists for young people that routinely embeds access provision, or that deals with disability equality and is disability led in its content. BOP's work provides an opportunity for young disabled people to access the arts and to see their lives and experiences explored and represented on stage. At the opening performance we had groups from local schools who were on their feet and dancing by the end of the show!

What did the young people say about it?

"I learnt that everyone is the same, even though we're all different."

"I liked it when Rob was explaining to people what disability really is."

"My favourite bit was when Dave was like 'beep, boop, beep, boop'."

"I liked the fact everyone fits the way they are."

"I loved the songs."

What did the grown-ups say?

"Super Special indeed!! First show of the tour, and it is really worth going to! If you are interested in understanding more about disability, especially if you have children, truly educational."

"We enjoyed the show. How nice the message, element of empowerment and the social issue could be incorporated in a funny and entertaining way. Good if the show can enter into schools and reach out to more communities!"

In conclusion

The Super Special Disability Roadshow! is a rare example of a show for young people that talks about the complexity of the experience of disability today. Disability is often the legally protected characteristic that non-disabled people still find the hardest to understand, and therefore are scared to get it wrong. Our alien gives our audiences a chance to see how we can all learn and understand what it means to identify as disabled. After each performance we had young people and their parents say that it is the first time they've seen themselves and stories they relate to on stage. This shows the importance of every child being able to experience a piece of accessible theatre that addresses disability equality before leaving school and for the 11% of children that are disabled in the UK to see themselves represented in the culture around them.

boptheatre.co.uk/tssdr