

Access Officer Project Report

By Katrine Gabb – Access Officer, St Martins Youth Arts Centre – 4 October 2011

In late 2009, the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust made a small grant of \$24,000 to employ an Access Officer at St Martins Youth Arts Centre with the goal of improving access to all St Martins' existing programs and develop new projects and partnerships to further the organisation's goal of improving access and increasing diversity.

The role of the Access Officer project at St Martins Youth Arts Centre has been without doubt, a success. The obvious signs of change that have occurred here indicate the tip of the iceberg of a true organisational shift. The positive and highly supportive responses from other organisations and individuals represent the innovation and proactive nature of this project. It is of course only a beginning and the challenge ahead is to find further funding to secure the position in an ongoing way.

The role has ended up being a highly practical and pragmatic role and far less research orientated than the original position description indicated. This has occurred because of a combination of factors; the generally recognised need to identify the areas requiring change to develop the role to suit the organisation, the level of need and general openness of staff to effectively begin a cultural shift as well as the working method of the individual in the Access Officer role.

Below I have listed the areas that I have engaged in as St Martins Youth Arts Centre Access Officer.

Audience Development

A large part of the role has been the development of an inclusive audience environment for St Martin's shows. The way we approached this was to develop a relationship with two skilled theatre Auslan Interpreters and to book them for each St Martins show as well as taking on board their feedback and suggestions in improving this service. I believe as we promote more shows with Auslan Interpretation, the Deaf Community will begin to attend St Martins shows but it is a commitment that will only bear fruit after time. So far, I know of one deaf person who has attended and several Auslan interpreters who have used the service. My sense is that an important development for this relationship in the future is project and program partnerships with organisations and schools catering for people who are deaf or who have hearing impairment like Victorian College of the Deaf for example.

I also organised training from Vision Australia in Audio Description, a verbal description of theatrical visual elements for audience who are blind or have low vision. As a result of the training I have trained two young people from the 18+ St Martins program Catapult to audio describe and have employed them twice to do so. Having had this training myself means St

Martins has that skill in house and prioritized funds to purchase audio description technology. We hope in the future to train, promote and provide a group of trained audio describers in house who we can hire out with the equipment to other arts organisations in order to activate more small to medium arts organisations to offer this service.

Audience development has also very much been about simple things like extending our contact lists to include organisations offering services for people with disabilities, refugees, migrants and people who are culturally diverse and people from low socio economic backgrounds.

We also ensure prominent logos on all publicity promoting our Auslan interpreted audio described shows and wheelchair accessible theatres. In addition we have ensured large signs in the foyer during shows to educate the audience about the services we offer, we have developed better signage for accessible toilets, added an option on the booking system to advise us about people attending who use a wheelchair, added an access banner on our website that outlines our accessible parking policy and provides information of how to access St Martins as well as directs people who require support to contact the access officer for further help. Next year we (and our venue hirers) will offer the companion card service to offer a free ticket to people who require the support of another to come to the theatre.

We also emphasize flexible contact on our website, so people can contact us in several different ways which suit them.

Training

At St Martins, I have trained core staff, tutors, industry presenters, box office/ushers and technicians in inclusive service or inclusive arts practice in order to educate and inform them about dealing with people from diverse backgrounds including creating training documents to refer to in the future. I have also supported a young man with cerebral palsy to do an administration internship here at St Martins, including applying for money on his behalf to cover transport costs. He has since been successful in applying for our 18+ program Catapult and has been supported to do that.

St Martins offers Theatre Labs for young emerging theatre makers. I suggested that one of these be dedicated to inclusive theatre practice. The outcome of this was a theatre lab run by myself in collaboration with a theatre maker Paul Mately from Rawcus Theatre who has Down Syndrome.

Publicity and Networking

How we promote ourselves and what we include or exclude from these processes has been a part of the access officer role and yet still has much more to be done. What has been implemented is myself proactively developing a relationship with the graphic designers to educate them in accessible material design, building access approval into publicity design process, liaising with administration office re publication, website guidelines and general

flexibility of contact, liaising with core staff on appropriate language, having input into invitation lists, e-flyer lists, the distribution of a general email to alert the arts industry about the access officer position, compiling relevant websites for promotion of shows, compiling lists of relevant council contacts eg Metro Access Officers and targeted marketing eg schools for young people who are deaf etc.

I have also linked in to Arts Access, Deaf Arts Network, Vision Australia's online networks and met with relevant people (Arts Access Australia, Barkly Arts Centre, Community Cultural Development Officer from Dandenong, Youth departments in councils, Arts Victoria, Theatre Network Victoria, Youth service branches in councils, Arts Victoria, Theatre Network Victoria, Western Edge Youth Arts Centre, Westside Circus, Courthouse Arts, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and ARAB.

I have also attended forums such as one on informed consent, the *pARTicipation* forum on how to develop equal participation in the arts and the Australian Theatre Forum, where I spoke about practical ways to remove the barriers for people to access the arts. In November, I will attend the Australia Council/TheatreSpace Research Colloquium with Sarah, the artistic director of St Martins, and two young people from our Catapult program, both with disabilities, to address the question of accessibility in the arts.

Productions

My role within productions has ranged from attending key production meetings to ensure accessibility, liaising with director, production manager and stage manager about access services, supporting any individuals who require extra support to be engaged in artistic process (training for director and musical director in inclusive practice, attending rehearsals then providing feedback, sourcing individual skilled support etc). I sourced a mental health advocate to speak with actors and director on *The Dream Factory*, a show roughly based on themes relating to mental illness. One of our shows Hatched was a site specific piece so I sourced access matting to ensure physical accessibility. I also see my role as an opportunity to speak with the young actors about access and what it means practically.

Workshops and Programs

The initial diversity at St Martins historically was the appearance of a young person with a mild disability in a workshop context who may require extra support to be engaged. Untrained in inclusive practice, the teaching artist would mostly struggle with engaging and integrating that young person. As a result, I have encouraged all tutors to alert me if a child or young person in their workshop requires extra support and I will then work with the tutors and parents if required, to support them to support the workshop participant.

Our 18+ Catapult program was recruited from a very broad group of young people and as a result is very diverse and includes young people from Egypt, Ethiopia and Liberia, as well as two young people with a profound disability amongst other less disadvantaged young people.

This diversity in this program has meant that the audiences have naturally become more inclusive as the Catapult young people bring their own communities in to see their performances.

Reporting

Each time we go *through* an experience, be it a show process, the youth summit we held in September or a forums attended, I write a short report in order to disseminate information and create a culture of *inclusive understanding* about access, so that it becomes embedded in the people and not just one person's responsibility and knowledge.

In Organisation Visioning

I developed an access visioning session with core staff to imagine what the future could look like at St Martins and from that we have begun to develop an inclusive action plan.

Funding

My role within funding has developed to recommend potential funders for inclusive projects, make participatory arts elements stronger through design and support of projects and adding appropriate language.

Administration

I have adjusted enrolment forms to make them easier to fill out and declare the requirement for support more easily and have improved clarity of staff induction forms, consent forms, usher induction forms, position description forms and the website.

Targeted Collaborative Projects

Targeted collaborative projects are crucial for us to make strong links with communities. We also acknowledge what an important role we can play in linking young people from diverse communities with those already engaged with St Martins. During this access project timeframe, we have set up a site specific dance flashmob project working as a cultural exchange project between refugee and migrant youth and young people already engaged with St Martins. We are also looking at setting up an Inclusive Performers Ensemble to link young people with disabilities and those without to create performances.

Overall my role has been to assist the artistic director to design collaborative projects that provide the appropriate support for the community we seek to work with.

Targeting Individuals for Engagement with St Martins

Now when individuals, families or support services contact St Martins, we can feel assured that we have someone who is able to find the best way to support them. We actively encourage young people with disabilities, those from diverse cultural backgrounds or from low socio economic backgrounds to utilise the opportunities at St Martins. We are also able to offer subsidies or waive the workshop fees completely depending on the child or young person's situation.

I also have sat on interview panels for potential staff in order to ensure diversity and practical experience working with young people with disabilities and from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, St Martins is enormously grateful for the support from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust. The access officer project has changed the organisation in many ways and we are determined to ensure it remains an ongoing position.

At the Theatre Forum in Brisbane in September 2011, access and inclusion were identified as being one of ten things we, as an industry, need to focus on as key areas. St Martins was *the only organisation* represented there that had a role to ensure inclusivity.

We feel immensely proud of the organisational change the access officer role has enabled at St Martins. We ultimately wish to share our experience as a blue print to assist other organisations who want to broaden access and create a more inclusive and welcoming space.