53two and Accesibility

53two (Fifty Three Two) are an arts charity, providing platforms for underserved and/or disabled creatives that might otherwise not get the chance to follow their passion. Through grants etc we are able to offer subsidised classes, workshops and services for disabled creatives across all ten boroughs of Greater Manchester. Perhaps most importantly, since 2016 we have been managers of three venues, each of them accessible and created for and around accessibility. Most recently we opened a brand new venue in the city centre, for all of GM. This venue has been in development for several years and on the 4th January 2021 we signed a 15 year lease on two arches that we are currently developing and restoring to their 150 year old glory. Inside the arches, phase one of which is complete, we have a café/bar and arts hub and, phase two, a 150 seater theatre. The venue will be accessible throughout for patrons, staff and creatives.

<https://ilovemanchester.com/independent-theatre-bar-53two-opening>

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/theatre-bar-difference-inside-manchesters-20652141>

<https://ilovemanchester.com/53two-accessible-theatre-bar-opening>

Although only a registered charity for a few years, our growth and reach has meant that we have been able to extend our message that ‘the arts are for everyone’ across the entire UK, and although based in Manchester, our small but growing team have connected with thousands of disabled creatives in less than five years and provided an accessible, safe and comfortable place to work.

Since beginning our work, we have changed the way Manchester looks at disability within independent theatre. Previously, no stages in Manchester at independent theatres were accessible for wheelchair or disabled patrons. Even some of the bigger houses were failing to meet this requirement. Indeed only very few independent theatres/fringe theatres were even in a place to welcome disabled audiences – none of these in the city centre. In 2018 we won Best Small Venue from the Northern Soul Awards, acknowledging our efforts - <https://www.northernsoul.me.uk/northern-soul-awards-2018-the-winners/>

53two’s first home became a hub for artists but also for disabled creatives. We quickly adapted the space to mean that wheelchair users could access it throughout, attending not only shows but also workshops. We also built a lowered stage and ramp to allow wheelchair users to make it on stage for the first time in national events such as Monologue Slam. This allowed writers and artists to not only have their work seen, but spring-boarded them into other career prospects. We made it a requirement to have BSL interpretation on all our shows; visiting or produced in-house and where possible, encouraged captioning. With these facilities, we were also able to welcome touring productions from companies such as Taking Flight Theatre which are solely for productions consisting of disabled creatives, become a home for Bee Vocal Mental Health Choir as well as the Disabled Artists Networking Community meetings. For these changes, we received National Press Coverage on TV and in the papers, furthering our ambition to develop what we do for those who might otherwise be unable to achieve it. TV actor and founder of TripleC , Cherylee Houston, wrote a section in the Guardian about our work for the disabled community;

GUARDIAN ARTICLE: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jul/22/theatres-that-made-us-pleasance-ivo-graham-nadia-albina>

ITV INTERVIEW: <https://youtu.be/Gm2J286NC3I>

In 2019, Melissa Johns highlighted the lack of diversity on screens, particularly in commercials, so, for Christmas, we produced our own advert which grabbed thousands of views. Although the protagonist wasn’t disabled, part of our aim was to have disabled and diverse cast members on screens NOT because of their disability. This advert grabbed the attention of the National Press and we were aired on prime time television on the ITV news.

CHRISTMAS AD 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgcVs5MqUV0> (Audio Description version in video info)

ITV COVERAGE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxwkW66ONlM>

The project was such a success, it was decided that we would do a second advert in 2020 but include the community, asking writers from DANC to pitch as well as including actors with visible and hidden disabilities. All our creatives were paid.

CHRISTMAS AD 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plI7mG0oygE&feature=youtu.be> (Audio Described version in video info)

ITV COVERAGE: <https://studio.youtube.com/video/plI7mG0oygE/edit>

This Christmas, we were also able to provide Manchester Childrens’ Hopsital School children a chance to perform a poem as a part of our fundraiser for the Wood St Mission. Alongside creatives; professional and amateur, young and old, we asked writers and performers to record stories to be professionally filmed and shared. The children from the hospital stole hearts on Christmas Eve with their rendition of The Grinch as one of 24 stories told on the lead up to Christmas day. All stories were BSL interpreted and captioned.

MANCHESTER CHILDREN’S HOPSITAL: <https://youtu.be/FXRlLhPppoo>

In 2019 we were set to move out of the theatre for a 12 month period whilst developing our new home. In the interim, we took over some studio spaces, again, ensuring that the venue had wheelchair access and disabled toilets. These studios provided a home, again, for Bee Vocal Mental Health Choir who sung on both Christmas adverts and enjoyed screenings and parties there as well as singing rehearsals for their performance with Emily Sandé at the Royal Variety Show. Here, we also provided workshops and classes for disabled patrons and free self-taping for members of DANC.

When Covid hit, our plans were delayed for some 12 months. During this time, because of shielding, we continued our work, where possible, online.

On Jan 4th 2021, after much fundraising, we signed a 15 year lease on our new venue in Manchester which was to become the fully accessible theatre/arts hub. The venue will boast full access throughout, for patrons, employees or creatives with long handles, ramps, accessible showers and toilets. We will also house the only changing places toilet in an independent theatre in the city as well as a lowered bar section and till to enable wheelchair patrons to serve and/or be served drinks without difficulty. Ear defenders are kept behind the bar for neuro-diverse visitors with a refuge space for if they become overwhelmed. The tables in the venue are ‘modular’ which means that we can simply unclip them from the wall to change their configuration, allowing for larger wheelchair parties or more room, if required. The stage is at floor level and we will have wheelchair spaces as well as spaces for care dogs. All of our completed a bespoke BSL Course designed for us by Manchester Deaf Centre. The course will allow our staff to greet, take orders from and help our BSL speaking visitors. For those d/Deaf visitors without BSL knowledge, we will provide writing materials at the bar, so they can note their requests easily.

Performances that are BSL interpreted and captioned (when possible) and relaxed performances that are for neuro-diverse patrons with minimised sfx and a lighter overall feel to the shows are asked of every participant producer.

Many organisations out there do absolutely incredible things for disabled people to help them live life to the full – all of those organisations are worthy of praise, not least our dear friends TripleC. Very few charities specifically work for disabled creatives as directly as we do. Our work isn’t about providing a quick fix to temporary problems, it’s about ensuring that disabled writers, actors, directors, stage managers and more get to change their lives by actually participating, gaining exposure and developing a CV. This longevity of the results allows those that have worked with us to take their skills beyond one place or a one-off event, and nurture them, develop them, display them and share them for many years to come, launching careers and enabling where it may otherwise have been or felt impossible. Our venue is such that although accessible, the design is ‘inclusive’. Many venues have ‘add on’ features for disabled visitors whereas 53two is designed firstly for disabled users and so there are no add-ons; everyone can walk up a ramp but not everyone can get up a flight of stairs, so, we have ramps, no stairs and the lack of the latter feature goes unnoticed. These small, subtle differences allow us to develop an inclusive feel without it being about inclusivity. Instead, our work encompasses ‘community’ whatever your story. Everyone is treated the same because the building that this work takes place in is created at one level – physically and with a global awareness.

These changes; be it a long door handle, not a lowered door handle, a BSL speaking staff member, not an awkward conversation, a changing places toilet, not a limited time to enjoy the company of others…all of these add up to the venue becoming a safe space for everyone. The arts are for everyone and inclusion needs to be a long term programme stemming from the work of our trustees and steering bodies with lived in experience of disability, right through to the welcoming staff at the bar. If we don’t notice the changes, everyone is made to feel more comfortable, confident, included and this, in turn, can affect changes later in life.

For at least the next 15 years of our lease at this venue, we will continue to grow, learn and develop but always ensuring that inclusion is a normal, everyday occurrence and not a token or add-on. Our outreach programme will take work in the creative sectors across all ten communities with 53two Arts Hub at the centre, enabling, welcoming and enjoying our community.

As restrictions eased, we created a video to encompass our thoughts, how much we’ve missed theatre and truly, how theatre is for all; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7qkT2bJrMw>

*I have never loved an organisation as much as I love 53two. Their continuous support for emerging artists is remarkable and has provided me personally with opportunities that have significantly enhanced my own career; from hosting monologue slam which allowed me to showcase both my writing and acting, to producing shows such as the MancMade Christmas festival and Offcut Manchester which have allowed my writing and acting to be seen by industry professionals, 53two have helped me no end. Without these opportunities that 53two have provided I would not have had the vital ‘credits’ that are required for meaningful participation in the arts. As a disabled artist, barriers to accessing careers in the arts are rife and as such, there is a significant lack of representation, but 53two have demonstrated their relentless commitment to ensuring inclusion and equal access to these opportunities and in doing so have built a ramp to the stage- something which has not been done for me anywhere else. 53two have also hosted the Disabled Artists Networking Community (DANC) and have remained in conversation with the Disabled artists community to ensure best practice. It is not only physical inclusion that has been championed by 53two but, in aiming to make theatre accessible for all, they now also offer Unwaged tickets. For an independent theatre this is incredible and sets the standard for all. In such uncertain times, with job and employment precarity growing, this is such an important part of making leisure and cultural activities available to all, not just those with large disposable incomes. I myself have experienced homelessness and abject poverty and should this sort of initiative have been available to me then I would have certainly felt more valued and included in the arts community and society more generally. I want to thank 53two for their passion and commitment and hope they can continue their vital work. The most sincere, welcoming and supportive team!*

***Steph Lacey***

*This is a theatre space that has welcomed me as a new writer-a woman over forty - and encouraged me to develop my work and ideas. Creatives are encouraged to learn and develop their craft here. As a result I have recently had my first play staged at Offcut Manchester. This is a place where new theatre for all-not just for an elite- is developed, nurtured and brought to life in outstanding performance. This is a venue where the unwaged can see a performance for two pounds. My son has a muscle wasting condition and uses a wheelchair. He cannot transfer. Whist he studied theatre and performance at University, he was able to access all productions without problems, as there is a ramp and accesible toilets. In contrast, many theatres are inaccessible. When he graduated with a First class degree and began to perform, reaching the final of the monologue slam, Simon Naylor built him a ramp so he could easily access the stage. He has since performed on stage in in play for Offcut, again using the ramp which is a permanent part of the staging. This is a friendly welcoming space which offers theatre for all and has changed the face of theatre in Manchester. Simon Naylor and Alexandra Maxwell’s passion for theatre and people shines through everything they do.*

***Anne Duffy***

*Although I am offering this testimonial about the ‘Building‘ described simply as 53two it is impos-sible, for me, not to chronicle my thoughtswithout referring to 53two as a new ‘WAY-OF-LIFE ’, unique to MANCHESTER. Allow me to explain. Before 53two there was a vibrant Mancunian Theatre Community , BUT it was clearly split, between ‘Amateur’ and ‘Professional’. Likemost conurbations, these two passionate communities did not recognise, let alone ,show any respect for each other, so they never, creatively, had any chance of ever combining to generate a NEW community of Actors. The arrival of 53two almost immediately ended this division and created this NEW community. In my case , I had been a successful professional Television Producer/Director for over 50 years. Due to life threatening illness ( contacted whilst directing the ‘International Indian Film & Television Award’ Show in Mauritius),I was forced to retire from the career that I had enjoyed so much. To begin again , at the age of 75, would normally be unthinkable and certainly to find a route to that end, virtually impossible. Then along came 53two initially, in the form of the MANCHESTER ACTORS PLATFORM (MAP). To my utter amazement and delight I found that the unique philosophy, (formulated by SIMON NAYLOR) , facilitated a situation in which I could mix with both the amateur and the professional, whilst learning the skills required by many other facets of my previously long career. Because SIMON NAYLOR decided that the interior layout of 53(2) would be sectioned off to produce a working bar, a working Theatre, numerous areas designated for teaching, dressing rooms and meeting rooms. It meant that whenever I visited 53(2) I was guaran-teed to meet and talk to a fellow enthusiasts whilst learning about genuine opportunities within 53two. So far I have completed THREE Acting courses plus introductions to both the Stanislavsky and Meisner acting methods , Welcomed into the NORTH WEST WONDERS festival ( where I received very positive Critical Acclaim) and more recently in the new OFF-CUTS Festival. None of this would have been possible without the uniqueness of 53two. 53two has changed my life from a potential sedentary and most unsatisfactory enforced retirement into a critically acclaimed actor (making my theatrical debut at the age of 78) . I cannot express my gratitude enough to 53two for giving me a brand new lease of life which has also impacted on my entire family (visiting my performances in 53two from as far afield as Hong Kong, Bermuda, Berlin and London.) There ARE other venues for amateur and/ or professional theatricals to gather ( Royal Exchange, HOME , Hope theatre ) but NONE with anywhere near the warmth, non- judgmental, welcoming, inclusive atmosphere that can ONLY to be found in 53two. I am NOT referring to a building called 53two, but the philosophy that has turned a building called 53two into a WAY OF LIFE that just did not exist before.*

***Royston Mayoh***

*2 and a half years ago I was signed off from the fire service suffering from PTSD. They were very dark times and I had a long struggle ahead of me. I was receiving counselling from the service in Manchester and I used to pass 53two every Monday. I popped in one day to see how they were do-ing and have a chat and the rest is history. I found people who were there as a community and not a business and they invited me to be a part of it. I was given free courses, as the fire service stopped my pay. I readily helped when I could and they understood if I let them down on occasions as some days it was hard to leave the house, but they were always there for me as friends and I was always welcome. Eventually I turned my life around and feel more confident in dealing with things.*

*I’ve even been in plays and on tv. I can honestly say that Simon and Alex have helped me more than they will ever know and I am forever grateful.*

***Dave Howell***

*This theatre space is one of a kind. Offering more opportunities than any other that I know of.*

*I am the co founder of TripleC which creates projects to break down barriers to up inclusion and representation of disability in the arts. We created the Disabled Artists Networking community (DANC) which is hosted by different theatre’s or arts venues every 6-8 weeks. 53two was one of our strongest DANC events yet. Simon and his team listened to everything we said/suggested and made 53TWO accessible to all disabled artists!! And that was just the start. Since then, they have given so many opportunities to professional disabled actors and writers and quite honestly changed their lives. If every arts venue/organisation/theatre had the same values and passion for change as 53two and the team, the arts industry would be more inclusive, more accessible, more representative and even more life changing. LONG LIVE 53TWO.*

***Melissa Johns***

53two have done everything in their power to ensure that theatre is accessible and for everyone – although this is specifically about disability, unwaged tickets fall into that category with disability sometimes meaning individuals can’t work and so have reduced income.

Some of our initiatives include;

All our shows now have BSL interpretation

Online productions/videos etc are BSL interpreted when necessary and always captioned

Where possible, live shows include captioning

Building infrastructure has been built around visitors with disabilities

Production casting and creative involvement has been diversified to allow opportunities where others might not be available

Discounted/free workshops and services for actors with disabilities

Projects include;

Disability awareness with Christmas adverts

Inclusivity on digital projects during lockdown

BSL Training for our staff

Disability awareness training for our staff

These are just some of the individual projects, however, our main aim is, as mentioned, to not focus solely on one-off events but in fact action long term change, awareness and accessibility.

Our entire team has worked for accessibility since we opened our first venue in 2016. Since then, we have made leaps and bounds towards being able to provide a wholly accessible, comfortable and safe space for every single visitor. Alongside this we have worked with our partner charities to continue to provide the services we offer for creatives, but in ways that can make them accessible and open to everyone. This work has been a full team effort from the trustee level down to our dedicated bar/café staff and for all of us, this award would fully underpin the efforts they have made but also draw a line in the sand for other venues to meet – theatre is for everyone and a small, independent like ourselves shouldn’t have to lead the way.

Opening announcements:

<https://confidentials.com/manchester/53two-to-open-theatre-bar-below-manchester-central>

<https://manchesterwire.co.uk/first-look-work-begins-on-manchesters-newest-northern-focused-arts-and-theatre-bar-53two/>

<https://www.visitmanchester.com/ideas-and-inspiration/blog/read/2019/10/manchesters-much-loved-independent-theatre-53two-is-to-be-reborn-in-the-railway-arches-b979>

Christmas Advert Press 2020:

<https://northwestend.com/?p=1449>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-55176120>

Young Company SWITCH MCR: *Formed from a group of Royal Exchange Young Company alumni, they describe themselves as “a theatre collective made up of young people aiming to create new and accessible theatre”.*

<https://circlesandstalls.com/2019/01/06/manchester-theatre-2019-the-increasing-influence-of-young-companies/>