

Questionnaire for theatre expert

**Name: Bernard Latham**

**Occupation: Actor/Director**

**Country of residence: UK**

Please, answer the following questions giving specific examples where possible:

# Experience and Expertise

Outline your experience and expertise in the area of theatre

I am an Actor, Director and Writer who, for the past twelve years has concentrated my work on developing a model for teaching drama to visually impaired young people.

As an Actor, I started work professionally in 1970 playing roles dealing with both tragedy and comedy. I have been fortunate to work in most of the theaters through the UK, played numerous roles in Television and film and performed in approximately 30 radio plays.

As a Director, I started when I was only 18 years old, by winning The

Manchester Drama Competition in 1969 for the production of

Aristophanes’ “Lysistrata”. In the early 1970’s I formed the Bishop

Stortford Youth Theatre at the Triad Arts Centre producing “As You Like It”, “Little Malcolm” and self created work. In the 80’s I directed two plays in the Northcott Theatre, Exeter, Dario Fo’s “Trumpets and Raspberries” and Alan Bleasdale’s “Having a Ball”. Work also included Directing at

The Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, with Alan Bleasdale’s play “No more

Sitting on the old School Bench”. This production was my first experience of casting and training 48 young people who had no professional acting experience.

In 2003 I was invited to Freetown, Sierra Leone, to stage a choral concert that was booked to travel on tour throughout the UK, culminating in a final concert at Westminster Abbey. The choir came from The Milton Margai School for the Blind in Freetown and was made up of 35 young people who were either completely blind or severely partially sighted. The experience of working with these young people was the catalyst for me to become involved in teaching visually impaired young people drama. I quickly realized that my initial thoughts of what blind people might be capable of in the Performance Arts, were completely wrong. On my return from Sierra Leone, my wife Jane and I started UCAN Productions, a non profit company, with the sole purpose of creating opportunities for blind and partially sighted young people to participate in the Arts. Since then I have dedicated my time to creating an effective theatre based model of working to enhance the confidence and overall wellbeing of those with sight loss. We currently have over 600 members and work with the UK’s largest sight loss charities including RNIB, Guide Dogs for the Blind and more recently Blind Children UK.

What has been the impact of theatre on your own life?

As a child I was incredibly shy. I found normal communication difficult, and it was almost impossible for me to express myself with ease. When I was 14, my English Teacher introduced me to Youth Theatre, and all its possibilities. I gradually managed to grow in confidence. Emotionally it was a revelation, I shared experiences with like-minded young people and I was fortunate to be guided by gifted and generous directors and actors.

The end result, was, I learnt to speak up for myself. Working in a large group on ensemble projects proved to have a positive influence on me. It taught me to listen, to observe and to participate. I learnt the real value of working as a team member.

As a young person, Theatre changed my life for the better by teaching me confidence. It also gave me a strong foundation on which to build my career.

Basically, Theatre changed me from a quite almost dysfunctional child into a confident and productive young person and adult. I hope in some way to help visually impaired young people do the same.

What impact do you think theatre can have on our lives and what you consider to be its instrumental value (i.e. the way theatre can be used in particular settings rather than theatre as art or entertainment)?

Theatre brings communities together. It offers the opportunity to listen and understand and celebrate the differences we have. It allows us to investigate and emotionally involve ourselves in history and story telling.

We can play with truth and face our fears.

Theatre can be used in many ways to educate and contribute to society.

Having used Theatre Techniques in UCAN Productions for the past ten years, I can state with confidence that all our performances have challenged perception and led to a better understanding of what blind and partially sighted young people are capable of achieving. The general public often leave after a performance stating, ‘That was amazing’, or, ‘How did those blind children perform like that?’ In truth, it’s not amazing. Like most things, their performances and successes are built on hard work and most importantly self belief.

Many of our young people have gained in confidence and are now better equipped for independent living.

Another great value to our work is that our participants feel less isolated and are more likely to go on to Higher Education and then on to employment.

What strategies do you use and how do you work with hard to reach groups or people who are not usually engaged with theatre or who might be reluctant to take part?

I have specialized in hard to reach groups for most of my professional life. In my experience the key is to treat people with respect and employ all the techniques I myself was taught many years ago.

My strategy has always been to start with very simple and achievable activities, which help to firstly discover yourself and your own capabilities. It is very important to create a safe and supportive environment where people learn to play freely, (as we all did as children), with unhindered voices and open expressions.

Constant honest encouragement and advice is vital to motivate those who are reluctant. Encourage those who are very nervous to ‘sit out’ until they feel comfortable enough to join the group. Also accept that drama is not for everyone and do not feel too down heartened if people refuse to engage with physical activity. However, keep changing and trying things from a different angle, until you feel the majority of the group is engaged. At this stage you can then go on to share ideas, remembering to keep everything very simple.

Patience, gentle encouragement and the belief that everyone can contribute are vital.

Always celebrate the smallest achievement.

# Theatre and Working with the people with visually impaired people

Describe any experience you have had of working with visually impaired people either with theatre or in some other capacity.

I have worked in a full time capacity for the past 12 years with visually impaired young people. In that time I have directed 60 shows and delivered over 1000 workshops. Together, we have created Theatre, Radio Plays and Music. The age of the young people I have worked with is between 7 and 25 years old, although I am currently working on a cross generational project to celebrate UCAN Productions 10th

Anniversary, which will be performed in the summer of 2015. A full list of our work can be found on www.ucanproductions.org

A number of our former visually impaired participants have now become workshop leaders and many have gone on to study Drama at University.

How was working with visually impaired people different to the way you would normally work?

To work productively with visually impaired young people you have to make your work practice accessible. In order to do this you have to gain a great understanding of what it might be like to have sight loss and at the very least, I would suggest, that before embarking on any work with visually impaired people, training on the practical and emotional elements of having sight loss should be undertaken – along with classes on how to guide a blind person.

All this training was a great help to me when I began working with blind and partially sighted people. However, it should be noted that when working with able bodied people, the workshops are usually the same, except without the visual awareness additions.

As one of many examples of making a workshop more accessible, always remember to start your sentence with the participant’s name. This is very important, as without it, the young person will have no idea you are talking to them

There is much more preparation needed when working with blind and partially sighted people. For example, always visit a workshop venue before your participants arrive and make sure that the space is clear and safe, make a note of anything that might cause the young people difficulty and make sure to inform them at the beginning of the workshop.

I have always prepared my work well in advance. To me, being visually impaired is an inconvenience not a disability. So I work with the same goals in mind, only a little slower. Knowledge of the space is crucial and much more time needs to be given to allow those participating get to know and feel comfortable in the space. Of course all this requires patience, but once overcome, anything is possible. To encourage a blind actor to simply walk across a stage with confidence takes time, but has a huge impact not only on the actor but also the audience.

What impact has working with visually impaired young people had on your own practice?

There is no doubt that working with these young people has changed my own practice. It can be very challenging but I have never found anything in my entire professional career that is more rewarding.

I have changed the way I write and I am constantly looking for script adaptions to include audio description within the text (almost like a radio play). Shakespeare is wonderful to work with as most of the plays include lines such as ‘Here comes Romeo’, which removes the need for visual narration. As an Artistic Director I am exploring the possibilities of embedding audio description into the actual body of the script of every new play we produce.

What do you think is the value for visually impaired young people of working through theatre?

In my opinion, the value for working through theatre for visually impaired young people is:

Improved communication skills

Feeling less isolated

Improved special awareness

Building a social network and making new friends

Physical and vocal confidence

Feeling proud and successful

VISION

What do you think we should consider regarding the use of theatre in the VISION project?

Safety of the participants is paramount. All necessary safeguarding and insurance requirements should be in place before considering activities.

The communication needs and general abilities of the participants should be accessed before any workshop planning.

As these young people live with sight loss all the time, their opinions about activities should be valued. It is important to remember that they are the ‘experts’ in their own eye conditions.

Choose a theme that everyone can get involved in and contribute to.

Encouragement and applause should be used whenever possible

Set aside time before activities start to allow the participants to ‘explore’ the space. Also narrate the surroundings explaining where doors, windows and furniture are.

In my experience, many visually impaired young people tire quickly, it is important to take frequent rests and initially begin with workshops that last no longer than 90 minutes.

I have found a great value to involving parents, guardians, and teachers by inviting them to workshops and performances. I feel that it is incredibly beneficial for the participants to feel pride and success in what they have achieved.

What do you think could be the impact of this work?

I think this is an exciting and innovative project that will allow different countries to share their good practices. It can only have a positive impact on all those involved.

I firmly believe that visually impaired people have a unique contribution to the local and wider communities. Without opportunities, such as this project to promote their abilities, these contributions will be lost.

It is a wonderful opportunity for visually impaired young people from different backgrounds and cultures to come together and learn new skills and most importantly make new friends.

Just to meet someone from another country is a positive. To be given the opportunity to share work and techniques with these people has boundless possibilities. All for the better good.

Please attach a current CV with this questionnaire

Bernard Latham

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