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Performing Arts Accessible



As part of culture360 recent [Call for articles](#), Medea Santonocito spoke to Suzanne Lofthus, Artistic Director and founder of Cutting Edge Theatre, about equal opportunities and performing arts.

Suzanne, can you tell us about the company and its activities?

[Cutting Edge Theatre](#) is based in Edinburgh and was founded in 1995 with the goal of using theatre as a tool to make a difference in people's lives. We currently have several projects with disabled people and local communities.

"Inspire Disability Arts" is our programme dedicated to promoting **equal opportunities for learning disabled and disabled people interested in the performing arts**. The idea is that theatre can help them increase their self-esteem, vocal skills and confidence in life. We run in-person and online drop-in classes, structured training projects such as the *Youth Theatre* for learning disabled aged 13 - 17 and the *Young Company* for 18 - 25 year olds, which lasts for three years. In Scotland, if you have a learning disability and you want to train professionally as an actor with your peers, in a supporting environment, there are no opportunities. We want to bridge this gap: our bigger project in the long term is working with 40 other companies and individuals on how we can change this situation.

Our professional productions in development for 2023 are a musical adaptation of the 1940s novel *Now, Voyager*, tackling the topic of middle-age body dysmorphia and mental health; and *Phased Out*. This last work was inspired by a law that is currently being challenged in the UK, according to which if your baby has Down's Syndrome you can abort that baby until the day of

birth, while for “normal” babies this can be done until 6 months into the pregnancy. So the story is set in a future society that has got rid of disability: the protagonist has cerebral palsy, she is non-verbal, and we revisit the value of her life.



Image from the play "Hope Rises", about the life of Jesus, Edinburgh © Penn Photography 2022

Apart from that, we are working on the annual Easter play, a site specific and open-air staging of the *Passion of Jesus*, performed on Easter Saturday. It is a **community play**, meaning that most of the **actors as well as the supporting crews** (sounds, costumes, catering, etc.) **are volunteers**.

You mentioned disabled people and local communities. What other groups are you trying to involve?

Personally, I have been working with **people in the social justice service, both here in Edinburgh and abroad**. In Italy, for example, they see the value of theatre for inmates. I made contact with Opera prison in Milan and staged a Passion Play there, called *The Life of Jesus*, which was quite controversial because I brought together female and male inmates.

My approach to theatre is more about mentoring the artists rather than taking over them, so inmates were responsible for the different aspects involved in the staging of a play. I believe **the process is as important as the final result**, in other words, what **benefits the artists are achieving** thanks to theatre - feeling more confident, developing new skills or getting to meet other people.



Actor in a Roman costume, Opera prison, Milan © Clara Vannucci 2016

Change seems to be a keyword in the way you teach. What is the meaning of transformational theatre?

Transformational theatre starts from the idea that **every human being has potential**. We use theatre to bring that potential out. The company is running a project with a female prison in Edinburgh and, at the beginning, we just went in there with a blank piece of paper and started working on the production from scratch, **mentoring** the inmates through every step. It is amazing to see women who have never acted, nor composed anything, now making their own play. It is just because they have never had the opportunity, all through their life they have probably been told they are hopeless: an older lady was talking about her experience when she was sentenced and remembered the judge saying to her she was a disgrace as a woman. Where do you go from there?

Another woman has changed her attitude during the process: she was initially very hard-faced and did not participate, but now her face has softened, she is trying new things - that is transformational theatre. It is hearing their laughter and knowing that we have made them enjoy life for a couple of hours.



Suzanne Lofthus and inmates, Opera prison, Milan © Clara Vannucci 2016

Downs with love is your professional production now on tour. What are the issues addressed by this story?

Downs with love talks about **disability and relationships** and what we perceive as normal. Beth is a young woman with Down's Syndrome who falls in love with a handsome young man - a singer in a local pub. She wants him to be her boyfriend, but his answer is "I can't." The premise of the play is: can a society accept seeing a non-disabled dating a disabled person, especially somebody with a learning disability? As part of the training, I send the cast out in character on the street, telling them to hold hands and look cuddly as if dating. We noticed that women were more accepting, probably thinking he was the support worker, while men were giving them a second look.



"Downs with love", poster © Jason Brown at Greenlight Creative

In what ways are your shows made accessible?

Downs with love and all our shows have a **sign language interpreter**, integrated as an additional character in the play. We also have **video and audio content on the website** so that blind and visually impaired people can access the stories before they go and see the shows. We actually worked with 2 visually impaired artists to make sure the script is clear in describing what is happening and where, for example you may have **sound effects** like the noise of a coffee shop **to signal a change in the scene**, or the sound of a clock to mark the beginning of a new day. It has been challenging and interesting working in this way, we have not solved every problem but we are trying to do as much as we can.

References

For more information about Cutting Edge Theatre, visit: <https://cuttingedgetheatre.co.uk/>

Cover Image: Beth (Abigail Brydon) and Mark (Calum Barbour) during a rehearsal of *Downs with love* © Penn Photography 2022

About the Author

Medea Santonocito is an Italian freelance translator and writer. Based in Edinburgh, UK, she has co-authored a book about the life of a pharmacist and photographer during World War 1 (Il fondo fotografico di Gio Batta Sina 1885-1967) and has written for ASEF culture360's Magazine, European Heritage Times, Fattiperlastoria.it, and World History Encyclopedia among others. Her favourite topics: history, cultural heritage and creative arts, books.

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