

CASE STUDY: Arts For All

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1. Background: about us

Touch Compass was established 12 years ago. It is New Zealand's first professional, inclusive performance company. Our aim is to challenge perceptions about who can dance and what dance is. Combining dancers with and without disability in ground-breaking, skilled performances and events, the company is renowned for its spectacular aerial pieces.

The company has two components: its professional performance function and Encompass, our community and education programme, which provides training opportunities.

In our workshops and performances, we strive to have an equal make-up of disabled and non-disabled performers or participants. We ensure that people with a disability are represented at all levels of the organisation from performers to governance level.

To have an inclusive society it is important to ensure that equal opportunities and respect for all participants are upheld. That means ensuring there are appropriate methods of collecting information about participants so that any special needs or requirements are met. Tutors, staff and volunteers need to be well-informed about inclusive practices and their behaviour and attitude reflects that.

2. What access means to Touch Compass

Touch Compass believes contemporary dance is an empowering activity that should be accessible to all. We believe that it's a basic human right that anyone who wants to dance can do so.

For us, accessibility is not just about venues. It's about changing people's perceptions, attitudes and practices. It's about respecting individual differences and encouraging individual creativity. As Professor Christopher Bannerman says in *Making an Entrance: theory and practice for disabled and non-disabled*



Arts For All is an Arts Access Aotearoa/Creative New Zealand partnership programme. The aim of this programme is to encourage arts organisations, venues and producers to improve their access to disabled audiences. Download *Arts For All*, published in 2014 by Arts Access Aotearoa, at artsaccess.org.nz or call 04 802 4349 for a hard copy.



dancers (Adam Benjamin, 2001): " ... the central issue is the democratisation of dance practice and by implication society."

The outcomes are performances where disabled and non-disabled dancers are equal contributors. Where venues are accessible to a wider audience, and where ticketing and marketing processes and practices are inclusive. And, for audiences, there's a new respect for performing arts and individual differences.

3. Our journey: the barriers, challenges and the rewards

We try where possible to use venues that are accessible for both the performers and the audience members. Often we have to make compromises.

Our first venue (donated for use free of charge) was up three flights of stairs. We had to carry our dancers who were less mobile up the stairs. Others had to walk up one step at a time, which took 15 minutes the first time. We used this venue as we had limited funds and we were doing aerial work that required beams. Aerial work has become a signature for the company but finding a suitable venue to rehearse in is a problem.

For a project company, surviving in the performing arts is extremely difficult. However, Touch Compass has developed a strong, recognisable brand that has toured nationally and internationally to Australia.

When performing at the Sydney Paralympics in 2000, we stayed at the media village. One would have thought that an event for disabled athletes would have suitable accommodation. In the bathroom of one of our dancers, the shower cubical had no handrails and no seat, so showering was difficult and dangerous. Perhaps running out of time was a factor in this not being completed but it created unnecessary stress for our team.

Finding accessible venues to perform, rehearse and run our programmes has been challenging. Those that are accessible aren't often available at the times we need them.

In some venues dressing rooms can be situated upstairs. For us, this has meant splitting the company and having some of the company upstairs and setting up a make-shift dressing room at stage level. This adds just that little bit more stress on the cast and crew. In some venues, the accessible toilet is in the auditorium and the dancers have to make sure they use the toilet before the audience arrives: walking through the audience before an event is less than ideal.

One of the rewards is knowing that Touch Compass has made a significant difference in the New Zealand arts landscape, showing that the arts aren't elite and that having an inclusive practice not only enriches our organisation but also anyone who comes in contact with us.

There is magic in an integrated setting where people have to work together to create great work and in the process learn a bit more about themselves, who they are, and how they relate to their immediate environment and within the world.

Our plans for the future are to reach more people, tour internationally and to have our own accessible studio/dedicated space. Naturally, life would be easier for the company if every venue was fully accessible.

4. Three top tips to becoming more accessible

- Develop an accessibility/inclusion policy and disability action plan.
- Ensure ongoing training and codes of practice.
- Research and keep abreast of international practices.

5. Looking ahead: the impact that being accessible will have on New Zealand arts

Touch Compass is a pioneer in New Zealand's fledgling integrated dance spectrum. Our aim is to continue to work with the different stakeholders to bring New Zealand's contemporary dance model up to international standards, where integrated dance is valued and an important creative opportunity. Lifting the barriers to inclusion is the primary challenge. Looking ahead we see a bright future for New Zealand's performing arts sector. The impact of truly accessible arts in New Zealand is immeasurable.