

CASE STUDY: Arts For All

Fortune Theatre and its audio described performances

August 2013

A grant through the Creative New Zealand and Arts Access Aotearoa partnership programme, Arts For All, supported Fortune Theatre to present six audio-described performances in 2012. Lara Macgregor, Artistic Director of Fortune Theatre, talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about the project; how it developed; the challenges the company encountered along the way; and how it marketed the performances to their target audience.

1. Background: about Fortune Theatre

I joined Fortune Theatre in December 2010 as part of a new management team, alongside our then General Manager, Jeremy Smith. I mention Jeremy because he was integral in the set-up of this project.

Fortune Theatre's key driver is ensuring we contribute every day to the spiritual wellbeing of our community. Our 13 fulltime staff strive year-long to produce the highest quality work and to service our immediate community, along with our national and international visitors.

Our programme consists of an eclectic, dynamic mix of the best contemporary national and international plays with a strong offering of New Zealand work. We're proud to collaborate with the Dunedin Fringe Festival, Stage South, Improsaurus and many others.

The theatre is located on the corner of Stuart Street and Moray Place in Dunedin and has two auditoriums: the Main Stage (230 seats) and the Studio (103 seats). Plays are produced and presented for both stages and we tour one production a year throughout Otago and Southland.

In July, Fortune Theatre received the Big 'A' Creative New Zealand Arts For All Award 2013, recognising its commitment to building audiences by improving access to disabled patrons.

2. The project: what it is, why you did it and what you wanted to achieve

We're constantly seeking ways to enrich an audience's experience of theatre. We jumped at the opportunity when Anna Henare from the Experience Access Charitable Trust approached us in 2011 to see if we were interested in hosting audio described shows at the theatre. It's a service we'd been contemplating for some time but didn't have the in-house resource to create and deliver, over and above our regular practice.



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.



With Anna, we trialled our first touch tour and audio described show during a Sunday matinee performance of Roger Hall's *A Short Cut to Happiness*. It was well-received and so we applied for funding through the Arts For All programme to deliver audio described shows for each of the six productions in our 2012 season.

The key reasons we wanted to offer this service were:

- **Accessibility:** providing an audio description service so that our vision impaired patrons could engage with us – and with our productions – in a way that hasn't been possible in the theatre's 40-year history.
- **Audience development:** creating pathways for as many people as possible to come and enjoy the theatre. Making it as easy as possible for our community to connect with us is vitally important to ensure ongoing growth of our audiences. It's a key responsibility to ensure we nourish our audiences of today and of tomorrow.

3. The process: developing and implementing the project

Once Fortune Theatre had secured funding, we set about communicating with all of our departments – box office, production, technical and marketing – to open up discussion about the project. We talked about our expected outcomes and got feedback from each department on how our organisation could best serve this initiative.

Here are the key elements in the development and implementation process:

- developing and producing the Fortune Theatre Access Guide in text and audio formats
- training theatre staff and volunteers as sighted guides
- developing a system for booking our audio description services, along with a guide and a booking sheet template to capture necessary patron information for box office staff
- using feedback to inform the development of our audio description services. After each audio described performance, we gathered feedback from patrons, volunteers, the audio describer and theatre staff. Changes were implemented in response to feedback. This included marketing strategies, the schedule of events, information for volunteers and staff, equipment usage, the booking system, additional production information for blind patrons, the access guide content, and braille programme content.
- trialling different types of audio description equipment. The fm transmitter with digital radios was the system we favoured because of its clarity of sound, compact size and affordability. Also, by using an fm transmitter patrons can bring their own personal radios, meaning attendance numbers are not limited to the number of radios owned by the theatre.

- All of the audio description services were provided free of charge to patrons. In addition, Fortune Theatre offered discounted ticket prices to audio description users and their guests. The services for each of the shows included:
- an audio describer narrating a pre-show introduction and performance description
- a touch tour led by the audio describer and stage management, with trained volunteers acting as sighted guides
- post-tour afternoon tea
- braille programmes.

Donations, community support, and extra time and effort put in by Fortune staff, along with Anna Henare and Experience Access, were all crucial for the success and quality of the services we provided.

4. What were the key challenges and how did you overcome them?

- **Slow development in our relationship with the vision impaired community:** We want this service to reach as many people as possible in a short space of time. It's taken a good year to see the growth of patrons using the service. This is ongoing and, like any relationship, it takes time and care to ensure a continuing bond.
- **Gauging the reach of the programme:** Again, this is an ongoing challenge that we monitor via direct communication with our vision impaired patrons, the vision impaired community at large, and family and friends, who also attend the audio-described shows.
- **Ensuring the delivery of audio described shows is second nature for our in-house and casual staff:** When patrons attend an audio described show it's vital it's seen as the norm. We overcome what could be an ongoing challenge by communicating our expected outcomes to all of our staff, and briefing our ushers and volunteers well ahead of time.
- **Technology:** It took some time to work out the best equipment for us to invest in, and then ensure our staff could operate and deliver accordingly. This challenge was overcome with patience, and constant communication between Fortune Theatre staff and Anna; Anna and our vision impaired patrons; and Fortune and its patrons.

5. What were the most effective ways you marketed the audio described performances to blind and vision impaired patrons?

- direct marketing to the Association of Blind Citizens Otago and the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind

- direct marketing through Fortune Theatre collateral – season launch, season brochure, website, Facebook, monthly newsletters, direct mail-outs
- combined database access across Fortune Theatre and Experience Access
- verbal promotion across the city to organisations such as Zonta, Travel Club, Rotary, Women's Institutes, the Dunedin Club and University Club.

6. If you did it again, would you do anything differently?

We definitely hope to do it again but we need to secure additional funding of around \$5000 for it to happen in 2013. It's been such a success. It's widened our reach into the community and is part of making the Fortune as accessible as possible. We did a lot of work over the year to build up our presence in the vision impaired community and provide audio description on a regular basis. It would be a big shame if it didn't happen again and become a normal part of what we do.

And would we do anything differently? Well, we did do things differently after each production to improve our services. It's an ongoing development process that requires good communication and constant review.

7. How did you evaluate the project? What did the evaluation show?

Firstly, I have to say that the response to our audio described service was overwhelming and all aspects of the project exceeded our expectations.

Anna communicated consistently after every audio described show with every patron who attended. She collected valuable responses to all areas of the initiative, which meant we were able to review every area (e.g. technical, comfort, access, delivery) as we grew the experience from show to show.

This constant review process provided immediate information about what was and wasn't working for our patrons. It meant we adapted quickly and effectively, ensuring the personal needs of our patrons were met. The quality of what we were delivering was raised each time.

Some feedback from our patrons:

"Blind people like to feel. When you put something in the hands of a blind person it's like turning on a light."

"My husband and I hadn't been to the Fortune for years. Now we've been to the two last plays and have taken two other people along with us. So it's all good for the Fortune and great entertainment for us."

Lara's five tips for arts organisations wanting to provide audio described performances

- Talk to as many organisations as possible that already offer this service, so you have lots of information to draw from.
- Communicate with all departments within your organisation before, during and after your initiative.
- Obtain feedback from all staff throughout the process and be sure you're aware of how the initiative will affect each department.
- Ensure you have a quality technician at hand to advise on changes that need to be made as you go.
- Request constant feedback during each session about technical comfort: e.g. ear pieces and transmitters.

For more information:

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