

## CASE STUDY: Arts For All

# Sadler's Wells, London

January 2011

Sarah Howard, Access Officer, Sadler's Wells, London talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about the dance house's commitment to providing access to disabled dancers and to audience members.

### 1. Background: about the role of Access Officer

I've been with Sadler's Wells ([sadlerswells.com](http://sadlerswells.com)) since 2008, working two days a week as its Access Officer. My job is varied and I work across the organisation with staff, audiences and performers to ensure our access is the best it can be. At any one time, I might be working with the marketing team about advertising for the next productions; providing training to the education department to work with disabled dancers; facilitating artistic opportunities at Sadler's Wells for disabled artists; and ensuring our three theatre spaces remain accessible.

I also run disability awareness training for staff, and liaise with other venues and theatres in London. At the moment, I'm talking to theatres about the feasibility of introducing a companion card.

### 2. Background: about Sadler's Wells

Sadler's Wells is Britain's leading and best-known dance house and has been in existence for more than 325 years. We produce, commission and present dance to London audiences.

We believe that dance, more than any other artform, crosses cultural boundaries and appeals to diverse audiences – whether it's contemporary dance, tango, ballet, hip hop, flamenco or tap.

We play a leading role in encouraging collaborations between artforms: for instance, visual artists and musicians working with dancers. Since 2005, we've commissioned or produced more than 50 new dance works by leading artists.

In England, lottery money is available to rebuild and refurbish art buildings to provide accessibility. In 1995, we were granted "up to £30 million" from the Arts Council of England National Lottery Funding to rebuild the main theatre, refurbish the studio theatre, and build a new community and education complex.

Three years later, our current building was opened in Islington. It was the result of extensive and ongoing consultation with the disabled community. A group called Free For All met regularly from the beginning of the project. Free For All included people with physical, sensory and cognitive disabilities, who worked face to face with architects, designers and Sadler's Wells staff.



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](http://artsaccess.org.nz) or call 04 802 4349 for a hard copy.



Sadler's Wells has two theatres (the main auditorium and the smaller Lilian Baylis Studio), along with the Peacock Theatre (a mid-scale, more commercial venue in the West End).

### **3. What does the word “access” mean to Sadler’s Wells?**

What Sadler's Wells has achieved, in terms of its access and ongoing commitment, is huge. Being accessible is about physical access but it's also about attitudes – being open, welcoming and pro-active. And it's about access for disabled artists to create and present work, as well as access to arts experiences as audience members.

Our building is incredibly accessible for everyone: staff, audience members and performers. I can get just about anywhere in the building in my wheelchair – even on to the lighting grid above the main stage.

So, for example, the main auditorium seats 1500 people and has three different places at a range of prices where wheelchair users can sit with their companion.

Staff attitudes at Sadler's Wells are excellent and most are very pro-active. Survey findings show that the biggest barrier for disabled people in the UK is attitude. You can have all the gadgets but if people don't want you in the building, you won't come. We have a large audience of disabled people who come here regularly because they feel very comfortable. We offer a 50 per cent discount on each ticket when a disabled patron has to have a companion. At first, we offered big discounts to get people to come here but over the past three years, our concession rate has actually gone down. That's because we offer good service.

In terms of the recruiting process, we're also very pro-active in approaching disabled people who have the skills we're looking for and letting them know about job opportunities.

### **4. How does Sadler’s Wells compare with similar theatres in London?**

Sadler's Wells is a leader in the field when it comes to accessibility and I hope we provide a model for other theatres in London and beyond. It's encouraging that many of the venues in London now have an access officer or manager.

However, there are still venues there that I can't get into through the front door. Many London venues are hundreds of years old and are listed buildings so making changes to their fabric becomes almost impossible. The Peacock Theatre is one such listed building. After years of consultation, we now have a series of lifts in place so that people with mobility disabilities can finally sit in the stalls.

## 5. What are some examples of your commitment to access?

- Every year, our community and education department, Connect, delivers approximately 500 workshops and events to more than 10,000 people. Providing opportunities for disabled people to “connect” with Sadler’s Wells is a priority.
- We have a regular programme of assisted performances for people with hearing and vision impairments. This includes captioning, signing and audio description. Paul Whittaker, who founded Music and the Deaf ([matd.org.uk/](http://matd.org.uk/)) in 1988, signs a couple of our shows every year, working from the score and signing what he feels the music is. Along with audio description, we provide touch tours and workshops. We’re also leading the way in exploring a “language” for vision impaired people that would work for contemporary dance.
- Deaf Debating Dance is a group that meets once a month. We offer them concession tickets to see a signed show, followed by a discussion after the show.
- For the first time, we commissioned a Deaf choreographer to create a work for our main stage. The piece incorporated signed dance and was a part of the brand new Sadler’s Wells musical production *Shoes*. The show was a huge hit at Sadler’s Wells in autumn 2010 and will make its West End debut at the Peacock Theatre from February 2011. This will include two signed performances.

## 6. Has your accessibility built new audiences for Sadler’s Wells?

Definitely. I run disability awareness training for staff and I tell them that by 2050, 50 per cent of the population will be disabled. That’s massive in terms of audiences and potential income.

Every year, we attract at least 2000 disabled audience members – and that’s not counting their friends and family. So it’s not just about being touchy-feely. It’s also about the box office and building new audiences.

Susie Tate, an English dance practitioner who moved to New Zealand in 2009, worked at Candoco, a London contemporary dance company of disabled and non-disabled dancers, for four years. In *Arts For All* (page 15), she says:

“The accessibility of arts venues and studios in Britain is generally very good: Sadler’s Wells is exceptional in its access and being inclusive, and one of the leaders in providing audio description.

“But for me, the key thing is that more accessible venues means more disabled people out and about, and so people are more open to the notion of working inclusively. Today’s young dancers are always looking for ways to break the barriers of how dance is accessed and disability offers a wealth of possibilities.

They see disability as a way to explore the potential of human movement rather than a feel-good thing to be involved in."