

## CASE STUDY: Arts For All

# Silo Theatre's sign-interpreted performances of TRIBES

### August 2013

A grant through the Creative New Zealand and Arts Access Aotearoa partnership programme, Arts For All, supported Silo Theatre to present sign interpreted performances of the play *TRIBES* by Nina Raine. In *TRIBES*, the central character, Billy, is Deaf. Jessica Smith of Silo Theatre talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about the project; how it developed; the challenges the company encountered along the way; and the key elements that made the project a success.

## 1. Background: about Silo Theatre

Originally set up in 1997 as an Auckland venue for hire, Silo Theatre was re-established as a production company in 2001 by founding Artistic Director Shane Boshier. Every year, it produces between four to six plays, presented in various venues around Auckland: the Herald Theatre, Q Theatre, Maidment Theatre, the Concert Chamber of the Auckland Town Hall and THE EDGE.

Silo's core artistic purpose is to produce cutting-edge theatre from around the world and New Zealand that speaks to contemporary concerns – theatre that deals with human, emotional and sexual politics.

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

We programmed *TRIBES* because it was well-crafted and a compelling story with wonderful characters. It also enabled us to engage in a conversation with an audience new to Silo because it deals with specific issues around Deaf culture and communication.

Directed by Shane Boshier, *TRIBES* was a bold and multi-layered production. We wanted to expose the Deaf community to a thought-provoking, dynamic and excellent theatrical experience.

With the help of Arts Access Aotearoa and Creative New Zealand, we programmed two sign-interpreted performances for the Deaf community plus a sign-interpreted matinee performance for students from the Kelston Deaf Education Centre.

## 3. The process: developing and implementing the project

There was a lot more involved in providing signed performances than simply booking interpreters and getting them familiar with the work.



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.



We wanted to connect in a meaningful way with the Deaf audience. We needed to ensure that we were delivering an experience and a work with integrity.

This is how we went about getting the project ready.

- We formed key relationships with the Auckland Deaf Society and Deaf Aotearoa.
- We brought Abbie Twiss onboard as our Deaf Cultural Advisor.
- We worked with Miranda Harcourt in the rehearsal room as an expert in working with the Deaf community and signing within a theatrical context (Children of a Lesser God).
- The two actors, Leon Wadham (Billy) and Jodie Hillock (Sylvia) regularly attended Deaf Club at the Auckland Deaf Society, had lessons in New Zealand Sign Language and worked with a dialect coach.
- We engaged experienced NZSL interpreters who have interpreted live theatre performance before.

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

We worked to create an authentic world that honoured Nina Raine's writing but also represented the Deaf community accurately. We needed to consult.

Firstly, we set out to find a Deaf actor to play the role of Billy – a hugely demanding role. The audition process was a challenge, particularly as the actor needed to use his voice on stage and be understood. Unfortunately we were unable to find a Deaf person capable of taking on the challenges of the role and in the end, we went with a hearing actor, Leon Wadham. To still comply with our goal of creating authenticity, Leon was immersed in the Deaf community. He attended Deaf Club with the Auckland Deaf Society, and took part in ongoing sign language lessons and rehearsal with a dialect coach to help with his voice pitch.

Abbie Twiss was added to the mix as our Deaf Cultural Advisor. We wanted to create a true and authentic world. Abbie's input was invaluable in helping us to achieve this.

#### **5. What were the most effective ways you marketed the play to the Deaf community?**

- Online and social media communication was vital to spread the word as the Deaf community are so active in this area.
- In our online spaces we made sure we were explicit with event details, dates, pricing, venue information, running time etc.

- We identified the best seats for viewing the sign interpreters and offered a special price of \$25 for Deaf patrons in those seats.
- We had Deaf Aotearoa promote and host our first sign interpreted performance.
- We built an awareness campaign for the show around social media and invested in specific marketing imagery – both still and animated – that we hoped would appeal and speak directly to Deaf patrons. Our SPEAK image with the actors signing the letters of “SPEAK” gained good traction for us and the production, particularly during New Zealand Sign Language Awareness Week.

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

Not really. We'd just aim to do it even better and apply our learning in an impactful way. We're really happy about what we achieved with TRIBES across the board. It would be good to sell more tickets!

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

We achieved a total attendance of 51 people from the Deaf community for our public sign-interpreted performances. This is a big improvement on the attendance we achieved for our sign-interpreted performance of The Brothers Size in 2011 (approximately 11) as part of the SIGNAL programme at THE EDGE. We also did a third sign-interpreted performance for schools. A total of 151 students came to this matinee and of those, there were a dozen Deaf students and four teachers from the Kelston Deaf Education Centre.

Initially, we were only going to have one sign-interpreted public performance but we decided to do an extra performance because it gave Deaf patrons more choice.

Creating a special discounted price of \$25 for Deaf patrons made the work more accessible to the community. It also enabled us to track the numbers of Deaf people attending because they booked using a special booking type.

Informal feedback through our interpreters and Abbie Twiss was hugely positive from Deaf audiences and the entire team involved in the production went on a life-changing ride, professionally and artistically.

Some feedback from our patrons:

- “I saw it last night. I thought it was fantastic. The signing by the actors was very good and they portrayed the Deaf person very well.” – Deaf audience member

- “Just watched an NZ Sign Language interpreted performance of Silo Theatre's *TRIBES*. It was fascinating and amazing. I want to do it again.” – hearing audience member
- Last night, a few Deaf Aotearoa staff went to the NZSL interpreted performance of *TRIBES*. A really fantastic performance.” – comment on Deaf Aotearoa's Facebook page

### **Jessica's five tips for other organisations organising sign language interpreted performances**

- Seek consultation from experienced and respected sources, starting with the Deaf community.
- Consult the Deaf community about your choice of play: maybe it's not the best choice for them (for example, a lot of dialogue can be difficult for interpreters and the Deaf patrons).
- Offer discounted tickets to Deaf patrons.
- Build a database of your Deaf audience members so you can keep in touch, consult and market to them about future sign-interpreted performances.
- Create dynamic, meaningful and unique marketing that speaks to the Deaf community, and will capture their attention and encourage participation: e.g. a signed video clip using a trusted member of your local Deaf community.

#### **For more information:**

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