

Jason Boyle (The Moon) and Kai Tomioka (Jack), MOON. Photo: Luke Evans



2Faced Dance Company has always been a company that thinks about its audiences and is motivated by the desire for equality. We recognised that if we wanted MOON to have considered and authentic access then we needed to involve specialist consultants and D/deaf and visually impaired artists in our creation process. After previewing MOON in 2017 we wanted to take the work back into the studio and work with a British Sign Language (BSL) communicator/interpreter and an Audio Descriptor to make the work accessible to a wider audience.

So we invited access consultants Sami Thorpe and Chloe Clark, BSL consultant Jemima Hoadley and audio describer Louise Fryer to work with the team for a day, meet Tamsin (our Artistic Director/Choreographer), see the work as it is and talk through some ideas about how we might work together with BSL and Audio Description (AD).

The Royal National College for the Blind (RNCB) is a 10-minute journey from The Courtyard Theatre, in Hereford, where we're based and we contacted Paul Read (Head of Performing Arts) to see if they wanted to collaborate. After a tour of the college, theatre and recording studios there was a clear connection and mutual benefit for RNCB, its students and 2Faced Dance.

After spending a day with each of the consultants and developing the conversation with RNCB we invited Louise and Jemima to come back for phase two of the work, which included developing a Touch Tour (1) with assistance from students at RNCB, integrating BSL into the choreography and writing and recording the AD with the help of the students at RNCB.

Chatting to Paul we had the idea that the AD should be written from the perspective of the 'all seeing' Moon, who is based on an aerial hoop, and that it could be integrated into the existing musical soundtrack. Louise was excited by this proposition as it had been the first time she had written from a perspective that was above, rather than front on.

"Although AD is intended to provide access for people who are blind or who have a visual impairment, I feel that the style chosen for the AD would also prove useful for any small children

Over the moon

Ian Abbott, Executive Director of 2Faced Dance Company, explains how new thinking was needed to create MOON, an ambitious outdoor dance and circus production which includes both British Sign Language and Audio Description

watching and for anyone who did not have a clear view of the performance space.

"At several points the dancer playing Jack draws on the floor with chalk. It might be hard to see what he is drawing unless you are in the front row. The Moon's AD also helped to develop the relationship between his character and the small boy, Jack, whom he befriends, and clarified sections where the storytelling of the dance was less clear."

We listened a lot to Louise, Jemima, Paul and the students at RNCB as they were the experts; for the dancers, it was their first encounter with BSL and AD. Jemima mentioned that she often works with D/deaf artist and BSL consultant Deepa Shastri and suggested that it would be important for her to be part of the process as well, so we brought Deepa in, too.

Jemima commented that, "Tamsin and the dancers were amazingly open and excited about incorporating access into the work. The dancers picked up the signing very quickly and were able to take complex direction so that the signing was clearly communicated, keeping up with the theatricality and pace of the work and matched to their character in the story. Deepa came in to work with the company at the end of the process to tweak the signing and visual narrative. Her input was priceless and she's very generous in her approach."

The dancers reacted really positively to the process and Jason Boyle (who plays the Moon) described his journey: "At first I was feeling nervous about the thought of using BSL, mainly because sign language is something of which I have very little knowledge. After being introduced to basic BSL my confidence grew, especially having such a good teacher like Jemima to shape the performance element. The task became less daunting as we were able to creatively engage and integrate BSL within the roles and the performance as a whole."

For Louis Parker-Evans (rehearsal director and dancer) learning the basics of BSL and the different ways that AD can contribute to dance was really enlightening: "Learning from Louise about how you specifically phrase sentences and choose adjectives was very interesting. Learning small bits of BSL and how you can use your body in

The most rewarding part was also the part that challenged me the most

a similar way to what we do as dancers was amazing." In our conversations with students from RNCB Louis gained a valuable insight: "We have a lot of interaction with children and young people through the classes we teach and our performances so we feel confident in making a work for them. However, if you haven't interacted with someone who is blind or visually impaired then what language do you use?"

Working with the students gave the dancers space to ask questions around the needs of people with visual impairments. The students were really welcoming and open when Louis asked, "What's the best way to ask 'how blind are you?'"

They helped find the best ways to lead them on a Touch Tour and introduce them to the props, costumes and objects in the show. Louis continued: "If I'm describing an object - what categories do I need to fill in? Texture, weight, size? Should the Touch Tour be conducted in my character as a chimney sweep from the East End of London or is it better to paint a clear picture with objective language and a little bit of distance?"

All the dancers contributed to the text of the AD which was written in collaboration with Louise and recorded by dancer Jason Boyle: "The most rewarding part was also the part that challenged me the most. I did feel slightly out of my comfort zone entering the recording studio for the AD; however, after a few moments I was steadily on my way."

The feedback and learning from collaborators, students and test audiences at each stage of this process has been fruitful. If we have needed to make an adjustment then there has also been an openness and willingness from our partners to answer questions and ensure MOON will reach more audiences.

When we presented MOON in Birmingham, in Summer 2018, Rachel Evitts, Patient Experience Sister at Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust enthused, "The performance was very well received by patients, visitors and staff alike. There were a number of patients that were too unwell to leave the wards, who could look out of their windows to see and enjoy MOON. The smiles on their faces showed just how much they enjoyed it!"

Louise is currently part of a European research project (2) and creating a suite of online materials for training audio describers using MOON as an example; she will also include it as a case study for her recently commissioned book on integrating access.

It is heartening to see so many different people take an interest in MOON and so many festivals wanting to programme it; we knew it was ambitious to include both AD and BSL in an outdoor production but our desire for equality of access for our audiences offered a strong motivation. We're happy to share our experiences with other artists who're considering working with either BSL or AD for the first time because we had a lot of support from different people throughout our process and if we can inspire others to bring access into their creation and performance then that would be even better.

Info

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References

1. For many blind or partially sighted theatre-goers, a touch tour is an essential part of the theatre experience. Having access to the stage and set before a performance is a way of gaining extra detail to allow them to engage with the production through non-visual senses. Patrons will explore the space and may like to handle selected props, costumes and furniture. Touch tours usually last around 30 minutes and need the involvement of the audio describers, front of house staff, technical staff, stage management and the company to work smoothly
2. www.adlabpro.eu

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