Training, casting, representation and actors with learning disabilities in UK theatre

SEPARATE DOORS 2

A report by Vanessa Brooks

With an exploration of the Silent Approach at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art
Authorship

The Separate Doors project is produced and this report authored by Vanessa Brooks. As a director and playwright she’s worked in theatres across the UK and her plays have been produced at all scales and commercially. For seven years she was Artistic Director of Dark Horse theatre, creating the silent approach as a means of integrating vocational actors with and without learning disabilities into general audience pitched work.

All content in this report, unless attributed to others, is the opinion of the author.

Process

The Separate Doors 2 project took place in 3 stages.

A 2.5 day rehearsal room action research process at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) with an integrated ensemble of learning disabled and non-learning disabled actors, focused on ‘the silent approach’ methodology.

A showing of the work and discussion with the creative team was then presented to 50 industry professionals at RADA on April 12th 2017.

A panel discussion followed with Director Phelim McDermott, Casting Director Sarah Hughes, Film Director Jane Gull and Charlotte Bevan from the National Theatre.

This report outlines the process, findings, views and opinions of creatives and influencers involved at all stages of the project and offers ideas for future progression in training, casting and general audience theatre production featuring actors with learning disabilities.

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This work can follow a ‘disabled-led’ arts model, excluding actors with moderate learning disabilities who can’t articulate concepts verbally or project manage, conflicting with a talent and skills competency requirement for theatre making, a specific art form.

The ideology of the disabled-led performance art form and the movement/s from which it grew, that work must be created and led by disabled artists in order to speak legitimately for a lived experience, is a potent force for change for artists who can effectively make work within its’ parameters. Many actors with learning disabilities however simply can’t work in this way, and neither can the disabled-led model embrace the essentially collaborative nature of the theatre art form per se.

Historically Mind The Gap, New Vic Stoke, Manchester Royal Exchange, Dark Horse and other venues and companies have produced new drama featuring roles for actors with learning disabilities but currently little or no ambitious general audience facing work for these kind of integrated casts is being made.

Learning disability outside of being an ‘issue’ or a ‘workshop’ or an ‘event’ is at risk of disappearing from the UK theatre landscape, including the canon, where not so long ago actors with learning disabilities were on main stages in edgy contemporary drama and, very occasionally, raising a stink and disrupting the classics.
Non-disabled theatre professionals bring value to a collaborative integrated theatre making process; closing the door to integrated audience facing work for actors with learning disabilities, who have been trained to work to standard rehearsal room models, blocks routes to working with playwrights, directors and companies who want to collaborate and evolve their practice.

The idea of only one kind of person being able to direct, or to act or to write, or to only be able to write a certain thing in a certain way for a certain audience segregates and separates, throwing a misleading mirror up to the people it seeks to influence and providing for general audiences a refuge from ‘difficult’ content or thought.

If the work that challenges happens somewhere else, somewhere else can be avoided.

Separate Doors 1 threw light on a handful of UK producing theatre companies which develop the talents of actors with learning disabilities and assists those actors to achieve their vocational goals and develop their craft in touring work to theatre venues. These companies offer skills acquisition and the management and consultancy expertise that allows actors with learning disabilities access to professional work and collaboration with other theatre makers.

Access All Areas and Hijinx have toured nationally recently with MISFIT ANALYSIS and MEET FRED respectively, both shows which draw on disability life experiences. Audiences without learning disabilities come to the work and both companies reach beyond their artistic contingency successfully, however the work can exist in a context of diversity programming, relaxed performances, (with an emphasis on accommodating different ways of being an audience member) and an erroneous understanding at venues of a uniform aesthetic for a ‘learning disability theatre’.

This disability compartmentalisation can deter general audiences.

A generation of young people with learning disabilities who happily watch Dr. Who on TV at home with their friends and family are being segregated from the rest of society in theatres via relaxed performances.

An idea of all people with learning disabilities being the same, and of neurological differences being identical to learning disabilities and of all people in this perceived ‘Bracket’ being in need of sensory accommodation and therefore all theatre auditoria containing people with learning disabilities needing qualifications such as adapted lighting and sound and a reduction of pulse quickening content is encouraging a theatrical autocracy and a sometimes lacklustre offer for adults with learning disabilities who like their drama as well buttered and ramped up as the next person. Work which is powerful, visual, has an accessible and compelling narrative and is excellent will reach people with all kinds of learning disabilities.

Exceptional actors with learning disabilities need access to the kind of technical skills training that any and all talented actors need so that they can be part of the work that any and all talented actors strive to be part of.

Leading conservatoire and project partner the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art is making bold steps to explore access to vocational training for actors with learning disabilities via this interrogation of the Silent Approach.

The project also begins an extended exploration of the Silent Approach as a means of directing integrated theatre and encouraging new writing for general audiences with this kind of diversity at its’ centre.

It’s hoped that a door may open to high level skills acquisition which is of value to pioneering producers and theatre makers moving forwards.

Telling venues, directors, playwrights and actors to ‘embrace the creative case’ by working with actors with learning disabilities isn’t going to result in a positive or even a collaborative outcome.
It requires bravery to work non-verbally in order not only to include, but to make great audience facing work and directors, playwrights and actors need training in, and exposure to, the Silent Approach in order to develop confidence and a new willingness to meet halfway between an established approach and a new one.

Offering theatre professionals these tools may open a door to exciting new work featuring characters and stories as yet unknown and of general appeal. The potential in exceptional playwrights and directors working with actors with learning disabilities to explore new views on the world can only be a forward reaching proposition.

The creative work at RADA as outlined in this report offers an insight into a new theatre form that may bring these kind of energising creative opportunities to UK theatre.

Director Phelim McDermott offers his impression of seeing the Silent Approach in action in the rehearsal room. Charlotte Bevan from the National Theatre outlines the flagship theatres’ commitment to increasing representation on stage, Sarah Hughes offers insights into training and the industry from a Casting Directors point of view and film director Jane Gull makes the case for inclusive training at all levels for actors with and without learning disabilities.

In film and television very positive steps are being made in the representation of people with learning disabilities in narrative drama; theatre now lags behind.

There’s no reason at all why new integrated, general audience facing work can’t happen at the same time as work is being framed specifically for learning-disabled audiences but for one form to exclude the other isn’t right, especially when the grounds for that exclusion are ‘It’s better it happens somewhere else, over there, in the studio in something special about being special because actors with Downs Syndrome and other learning disabilities simply can’t work in a way that makes naturalistic stage drama feasible, or viable’.

This position excludes talent, stops the representation of the whole of society in general drama and segregates actors and audiences with learning disabilities.

It’s also simply untrue.

Vocational, trained actors with learning disabilities with the aptitude and commitment needed to reach work deserving of a theatre audience can benefit from comparative vocational training and be part of casts in theatre work for general audiences.

The aim of this project is to prove it.
Panel speaker and Olivier award winning Director of Improbable Theatre and Devoted and Disgruntled Phelim McDermott responds to the Silent Approach showing at RADA.

Audio extract:

“I was relieved to hear your process, thank god there’s some silence happening and the things that might be said might come out of that silence, most of us I’m guessing know that’s important but it gets marginalised it gets skated over, so there’s one of the first obstacles, which is that even this valuable thing gets marginalised. Harold Pinter his reputation is based on pauses and we know what an important part of theatre it is but it gets pushed aside - silence on stage is part of the process and what might emerge from that. …Hearing about your process its about trying to change the culture, the culture of how things are made, the culture of what is accepted as art on the stage, the culture of how we interact with each other, and hearing about your process what I hear is an invitation for a group of people to get together and to meet each other, really meet each other where their differences disappear but are also celebrated at the same time so it has these paradoxes in it. It was exciting and touching to hear about your process and it immediately gets me thinking…I’d quite like to direct something where I don’t speak, because often that’s how my rehearsals start, they’re emergent and that’s what interests me and whoever’s in the room, whatever their ability disability or difference is, if you start from that place where flow can happen, you discover something new, potentially different sorts of theatre will happen which will excite people in different ways…So there’s an idea that there’s a way that you’re supposed to do theatre and I’ve spent a lot of time questioning that and mining it.”

“It’s very touching to hear about your process and I love it.”
The Silent Approach – what is it?

Objective/definition: What the character wants. Stanislavsky believed that in every scene the actor needs to determine what their motive is in order to carry out their actions, to do things.

The Silent Approach grew out of a clear and straightforward objective to develop the skills of an ensemble of actors with learning disabilities in order to get to a place where one or two actors could realistically work alongside non learning disabled actors in a piece of new drama touring to general audiences in middle scale venues.

My training as an actor, at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, gave me baseline craft and directing and tutoring in acting technique at drama schools had developed for me some deeper understanding of Stanislavsky’s ‘method’, action and objective, uniting, given circumstances, sense memory, endowing objects and all the other technical bits and bobs actors tend to explore at drama school, absorb- and then completely forget about later.

I was very grateful for this experience and the clarity of Stanislavsky’s system (a fundamental of most vocational actor training) when trying to formulate an accessible coaching format for actors with learning disabilities. I wanted my actors to work on equal terms with non learning-disabled guest actors, so it was important that their training model followed the same path as those actors (as I felt this was the skillset needed to do the job) and so that we all shared the same professional vocabulary.

This swam against the tide, most companies working with learning disabled actors tend to work within more accessible theatre styles but I was aware that developing skills in circus and puppetry wasn’t going to help my actors deliver a text based play in the round at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, and beyond.

In order to achieve their performance super objective the actors I was training needed to have a set of knowledge keys.

They needed to know how to work in a rehearsal room, to have an understanding of the working space, its’ etiquettes and its’ energy. They needed to be able to understand that making theatre (in this world of theatrical realism and written plays) is about telling a story to an audience and that the responsibility is to that audience because they’ve paid for a ticket and want something in return. They also needed to know that on stage they would play characters, people different from themselves and that they would need to transform vocally and physically to make the audience believe in the story, the play. They needed to develop stamina. They needed to understand the ‘now’, the present tense of acting. They needed to be able to observe and reflect. They needed to know about all kinds of theatre and see as much as they could. They needed to understand ensemble and collaboration in pursuit of the truth of a scene, understand the concept of character and they needed to love and shape the moments of their work, the craft of acting, for the works’ sake alone because there’s really no other reason to do it.

None of these aims are extraordinary but expecting learning-disabled actors to be able to achieve them is.
The actor training process for these actors was long and complex. By my reckoning it takes four years of training for an actor with a learning disability to be ready to meet an impartial general audience, a further two to reach full competency and continuous vocational skills development to remain employable.

I wrote a foundation acting course and subsequent two and three-year courses adapting the BA Hons course curriculum from the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts into accessible language and clearly defined achievable outcomes. Concerted effort was made to support the rehearsal room training with consistent home study and a company ethos focused on skills development rather than performance per se. Actors didn’t take part in any public shows of any kind until a basic skill level was met due to the risk of audience indulgence conflicting with developing craft competence and because people simply weren’t competent enough yet to meet the paying public. In house showings were dry affairs; there was no applause, no congratulation, only a need to improve, to develop core strength, to use Laban’s efforts, to create characters, to be directed through scenes. It was exacting and tough as most vocational training is and very challenging for the people who supported the actors as the formality and need to meet required standards were alien in the wider learning disability community but it worked and it trained actors who could engage in professional processes rather than performers who could only work in a particular context; the training tested raw potential and turned it into viable creative talent.

These trained actors were now capable of coming into an integrated rehearsal room and getting on with the highly collaborative business of making theatre and the actors themselves owned their accomplishment and professionalism, had pride in their work and high hopes for their creative futures. But that was only half of it, the shape of it, the training content had been framed to enable the actors to achieve, but making that content accessible and deliverable had been very difficult indeed.

The silent approach had to evolve rapidly in order to take this talented ensemble of students, all with evident aptitude and application, on a collective journey towards professional competency.

Removing the obligation for the cognitive deconstruction of language when this is the barrier to accessibility for actors with moderate learning disabilities seemed key to developing a rehearsal method which worked for all of us.

If the only words used in rehearsal were those contained in the text then text-based work suddenly became achieveable. The burden of linguistic assimilation was removed and actors were free to be, ‘in scene.’ Dialogue can be added later, with caution and clarity, principal character dynamics and drives could be worked on first.

Three key elements informed the methods’ evolution.

The first is a given by virtue of growing up with a sister with Downs Syndrome, two years older than me, with little or no speech. My communication with her was, and continues to be, generally non verbal and this bespoke and experientially learned conduit I quickly discovered viable in the rehearsal room. I’ve always communicated with her physically and with consistent eye contact, usually when trying to nudge her into doing something (direction is often persuasion).

The most beautifully honed syllabus and set of actor training objectives in the world are utterly meaningless if the students you’re working with don’t understand what any of it means, what it’s for, or what you’re saying in the rehearsal room.
I was amazed when I started working with actors with Downs Syndrome that the same non-verbal conversation could be had, that there was a universality in its’ application and that the actors liked and responded to it. I benefited from no fear at all in the exchange, I trusted it entirely, so did the actors; it was like coming home.

The second key element in the evolution of the approach was the realisation in the early days of the training, when struggling to find a way to explain objectives for physical exercises I’d constructed to develop co-operation, following, lifting, chasing and surprising other actors, that explanation itself is redundant, actors will follow and embellish and create if connection and that trust (again) is there and the outcome of removing speech for instruction and exploration was that the ensemble instinctively became more collaborative, listened with their bodies, observed keenly for the slightest movement or change of mood and built a shared understanding of time, place and dramatic connection. And laughter. We grew a shared non-verbal sense of humour. Crucial.

The third element was a personal dislike for intellectualisation, analogy and long-winded verbal dissection in rehearsal.

Words are often a veil over truth, vulnerability and action, anathema to dynamic theatrical discovery. The more words I could eradicate from a rehearsal room I felt the more meaningful the work itself, the people, the experience and the experiment could be.

The play which provided the impetus for the initial development of the silent approach, HYPOTHERMIA, was rehearsed using the method and delivered a general audience facing piece of text based drama with a central role for an actor with Downs Syndrome, played by Ben Langford who gave a visceral and potent performance alongside an ensemble cast of four further (non-learning disabled) actors. (Some impressions of that process from the actors involved are on page 23).

As a director, every rehearsal process and training situation since for me has been a further opportunity to explore this method for integrated rehearsal. The exercise materials and practice are now quite dense and broad-ranging and don’t translate well to written analysis, its only really by experiencing and doing the Silent Approach that it can be learned, it’s a technique non reliant language after all.

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I count as a success a rehearsal room that’s only ever heard the words in the script and instructions around the strike at the end of the day.

A slice of the Silent Approach was explored at RADA. The opportunity to do so in the context of the highest level conservatoire tutoring and direction was revelatory and over the course of the next few pages RADA specialists, meeting the silent approach for the first time, will give insights into, and impressions of, the method.

The guiding principal for the silent approach is that of creative equality and its’ purpose is as a bridge into theatrical realism, naturalism, standard rehearsal processes and integrated work for exceptional actors with learning disabilities who can and should be given opportunities to work alongside the best creative talent in theatre.

Anything is possible with an understood and achievable objective.
The action research process at RADA

The RADA team (Associate Director Geoff Bullen, movement specialist Angela Gasparatto, voice specialist Joel Trill, acting and text specialist Gary Lagden, actors Claudia Harrison and Jack Condon, the Dark Horse actors (Rebekah Hill, Alice Rogers, Joe Sproulle and Toby Meredith) and assistant directors Hannah Sharkey and Michael Lyle received a creative brief outlining the process, aims and script excerpts from source material; scenes from A MAN WITH DOWNS SYNDROME TALKS ABOUT LOVE AND TELLS A STORY, A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS’ DREAM, HENRY 6TH PART 2 and THE TEMPEST.

The content of each brief was identical, the Dark Horse version was written in an accessible format, both teams now knew about the structure, some rules for the silent approach and how to prepare for the work. All actors were asked to be off the book for their scene work so that there were no scripts in the room.

A pre project meeting was held at RADA, an opportunity for the directors and skills specialists to discuss the content of each part of rehearsal, the exploration of the Silent Approach and how interactions and exercises might work.
Responses from the tutors and the Dark Horse actors to the work

Day 1

Vanessa Brooks led an initial master class, an introduction to the Silent Approach in action embracing warm up, voicework, given circumstances for each scene and a block for the final showing.

Joel Trill/Voice Specialist

The Silent Approach warm up, was, in essence, a relief, it allowed us to get know each other as a group effortlessly, I felt free to explore my physical presence in the space without inhibition or censorship, this was primarily due to the atmosphere, commitment and modelling of the Dark Horse actors. The repetition of activities encouraged energy and a sense of playfulness for all. The energised and fluid warm-up sequence, has reminded me, as a voice teacher, that awareness of body and breath takes time to establish itself along with the trust needed to share that awareness with the group.

The onset of a traditional rehearsal process is often characterised by an abundance of discussion and physical inertia; but by briefing actors on their feet and subsequently moving straight into physical blocking, the energy from the warm-up was harnessed, maintaining the focus of the ensemble. Each actor was also able to assimilate and integrate: action, physical intention and speech together, providing a clear foundation from which to explore the work, and contextualise the subsequent workshop sections led by the creative team. The language of instruction used during the shaping sequence was concise and conveyed Vanessa’s expectations of each actor with clarity. The visual and auditory aids seemed a useful way of establishing reference points from which actors could orientate themselves, physically, and learn acting cues without too much prompting.

Gary Lagden/Acting and Text Specialist

I enjoyed all the warm ups, the non verbal communication and ensemble work was very good. It was also quite nice to not be in charge. The actors from Dark Horse knew what was going on and seemed comfortable with the approach.

I think elements of the Silent Approach are sound for actors. It encourages focus, listening, collective style, physical ground rules and company warmth in the space.

Angela Gasparetto/Movement Specialist

This was very interesting to both take part in and witness. The parameters of the work were very clear. The warm-up was a special and galvanising action for the ensemble and the set up of the scenes was useful and clear. It felt a strong way to start working together and established clear leadership, in Vanessa, in the room, which felt important for all of us (actors and practitioners).

Dark Horse actors/Collated by Creative Manager Stephanie McKervill

Joe said that the silent way of working is strong and powerful and that it helps with focusing and listening. Toby said that not talking means you have to watch more, focus and concentrate. All the actors agreed that they think the Silent Approach is good and that it means that they can just get on with the work.

Later that day each tutor and Associate Director Geoff Bullen led a class focusing on each specific skills area; movement, voice, acting and Shakespearean verse.

Dark Horse actors/Collated by Creative Manager Stephanie McKervill

Alice (and all the actors) spoke about the book exercise they did with Geoff and how they’d enjoyed it (although I don’t think that they understood the significance of the book - The Complete Works ed.). Everyone thought Joel had a lot of energy and was very clear and said they had learnt from him. Actors were asked about the Silent Approach vs. a more verbal method and said that when they come to work they want to work and not talk about themselves or other things. That this is their working time and their work. That it would make them too relaxed and energy levels would drop. That it’s about the ‘now’. Joe and Alice said they prefer to work physically and with fewer words, Joe said it was more interesting. (Rebekah added the forum on day 2 was dull and that that time could have been spent rehearsing).
Joel Trill/Voice Specialist

During my own workshop section, my focus was to adhere to the Silent Approach and minimise verbal instruction and interaction, which I initially found quite difficult, and my preoccupation with this combined with nerves, ironically produced the opposite result and I started speaking too much. Much to my delight the ensemble was responsive and attentive to the voice work out. We worked on Labans’ efforts, which was a useful way of giving textual lines intention and variable delivery. My intention was to use this as a way of supporting the actors with textual connection and ownership of language, which was effective; however, I would have liked to apply more of this work to their individual scenes, in order to support an exploration of pitch range, resonance and articulation.

Angela Gasparetto/Movement Specialist

One always wants more time and I wish I could have had one hour (if we had more time overall for the project). Specifically more time would have been useful to engage with the group as a leader/facilitator, practice and apply the Silent Method approach, as well as integrate my own working methodologies into the session. I think as I was diving right into creating performance material it felt I was trying to do a lot at once - learn how the ensemble was working and responding, in particular the Dark Horse actors as I tried to use the Silent Approach.

Learning how much I could ask of the group in a short period of time and at the same time figuring out how to ask things of/lead the group felt a challenge.

Days 2 and 3

The emphasis shifted from exploration towards shaping and honing performance content for the showing. Directorial reins were pulled in and the ensemble once again more tightly managed using Silent Approach techniques to frame scenes, work moments and ensure the content was robust. Later on day 2 and into the morning of day 3 the RADA team again experimented with communication and direction until the showing in front of an invited audience.
Joel Trill/Voice Specialist

As a voice teacher, I feel that the Silent Approach reminds both the actor and the pedagogue that silence is an extraordinarily powerful and valuable commodity in the theatre. In rehearsal terms, silence might act as a lens through which we view the physical life of a character, or a channel through which an actor can tune his or her sensory awareness. Ultimately, it is nothing to be afraid of, and therefore we needn’t fend it off, during rehearsals, with unnecessary and often irrelevant and exhaustive utterances. I learnt the act of speech should be treated with respect and encouraged to work in tandem with other communicative faculties such as vision, gesture and breath. I’ve discovered that actors with moderate learning disabilities can integrate successfully within an adjusted rehearsal process.

The Silent Approach potentially offers new ways of engaging with actors of all abilities. Meaningful and exciting discoveries can be made if people are brave enough to step into the work boldly together.

Gary Lagden/Acting and Text Specialist

I will always struggle with the concept of lack of praise in the rehearsal room and felt a little unfulfilled in the end as my natural inclinations were not useful in the Silent Approach.

In my experience of working with actors of all abilities I find that positive affirmation whilst still challenging is essential in creating theatre.

My feelings from Separate Doors 2 are mixed. On the one hand I thoroughly enjoyed working with the team and found the work challenging and exciting. However, I wish I had been able to get to know the actors from Dark Horse more. I felt it was a shame we were separate on breaks etc.

The three days left me pondering a lot of questions about inclusion, creative work, working companies and even why we make theatre. I am valuing all of these questions and the thinking I am engaging in around them.

As a practitioner I have been left wishing to explore more of the Silent Approach within the training environment in my own practice, currently more so than thinking of using it within the creation of work.

I am also now more interested in inclusion work and all of its possibilities – from building community all the way to what artistic possibilities are created with companies that have greater diversity in ability/disability.

I have been fortunate to work with physically diverse companies in terms of ability/disability, but this is the first time I have had the opportunity to work with actors who are working with a learning disability.

I recognised in myself a fear of getting things wrong/doing things wrong, however the encouragement given here and the clarity of practice has given me confidence and offered me great learning.

Angela Gasparetto/Movement Specialist

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It’s demanded of all to really listen and respond in the moment, to let go and trust. It also fosters and nurtures a sincere sense of ensemble, spatial awareness and play. Also invaluable is that it moves actors out of their heads and into their imaginative, responsive bodies. It does feel that it needs to be strongly led by one individual - this is more of an observation than a value.

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The silent approach and my experience in not only leading but also working with and playing with this group of actors was nurturing in its clarity and humanity. It’s had an immediate effect on my teaching practice.
“The ensemble performed the selected scenes with sincerity and focus. They were working with one another and with the story they were telling rather than individually ‘working the room’. Rather than any sort of compromise, the Silent Approach seemed to help all actors focus on and sustain a sense of connection and ensemble in the rehearsal room.”

Alison Hargreaves/Emerging Director and Creative Associate
Geoff Bullen, Associate Director RADA, reflects on the process.

Director of short courses at RADA and Emeritus Director of actor training, Geoff Bullen specialises in teaching Shakespeare.

What interested you in the project and what led to RADA’s engagement with the work?

RADA is very concerned with developing diversity within the industry and to this end we were very happy to host an exploration into how our training processes could be enriched by working alongside actors with learning disabilities.

What were your expectations before the projects’ start?

My personal concerns were about how my accustomed way of teaching (very active but also tending to be word-heavy) would work in this context. I planned to deliver a fairly complex aspect of Shakespeare Verse Acting and was determined to see how this might be communicated in a robustly physical manner. I had no expectations of how responsive, or otherwise, the class might be.

What are your thoughts about the Silent Approach, as a method to train actors and as a means to rehearse?

The most valuable thing about the Silent Approach is the palpable sense of equality it brings to the process, particularly the warm-ups. This is clearly useful for training as all can share a single ‘starting point’. In rehearsal it has some challenges, since silent signals can be more ambivalent than words: on the other hand, this very uncertainty might produce a richer communication between director and actor: one that avoids anything too narrow or prescriptive.
How did you approach tutoring Shakespeare in the context of this integrated ensemble?

I began by feeling my way through with some tried and tested warm-ups, and then continuing with an active, energetic approach. In the event, this differed very little from my normal way of teaching the acting of Shakespearean verse, since I found myself including (quite naturally) all of the actors and the tutors; and as the session was primarily about the dynamism of the language, its kinetics, I felt unabashed at becoming more verbal, since I felt enthusiasm was conveying much of the spirit of my words, if not the total, rational meaning. Later in rehearsal, I tried to bring this approach to specific lines, getting the actor to hit my hands in rhythm with the words of the pentameter. This was not successful, and the actor said ‘I can’t do that’ (in a factual not in a despairing or complaining way, which made the admission more poignant). If I had had more time, I felt I might have brought this and other kinetic exercises to a more successful conclusion.

What were the challenges of directing the actors with Downs Syndrome?

It varied a lot, and the method needed to be tailored to each actor, of course this is true in whatever context the director is working, but the Dark Horse actors need a more patient and time-taken approach. The necessary brevity of the sessions enabled me to see the challenge, but not really to address it fully. However, I firmly believe that an approach could be tailored to each actor that accorded with my own preferred way of working.

What are your thoughts on the training of actors with learning disabilities in a conservatoire context?

I have a very pragmatic approach, and I’m used to trying a whole range of stratagems to communicate, using approaches that vary from the deeply philosophical to the downright daft. A more doctrinaire teacher or director, working out of a specific method, might have problems. With regard to training, I think there is a real possibility of differing abilities working together but actors with learning disabilities might benefit from a preparatory course, possibly of a year. At such a time, actors and teachers could consolidate their approaches: and integration with the wider student body could be explored.

What were the key discoveries in the project for you?

That there is a considerable amount of ‘presence’ exerted by actors with learning disabilities: and that this mainly, it seems to me, is to do with the concentration necessary to perform their roles. It renders itself, though, as an intense kind of listening: an active, incisive presence, something that worked peculiarly well within the scene from A MAN WITH DOWNS SYNDROME TALKS ABOUT LOVE AND TELLS A STORY with Claudia and Toby. I discovered that there was an enormous range of ability within the four Dark Horse actors and that personality appears deeply and fascinatingly engraved.

Is there anything further you’d like to add?

I enjoyed being an actor again and taking part in the warm-ups and the tutors’ exercises. At times, I wondered if the need to work towards a presentation might be influencing the working method, the means dictating the ends, though the showing was an intensely important manifesto of the work.
Sarah Hughes on actor training

Alan Ayckbourn’s Casting Director Sarah has cast all the world premieres of his plays at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, in the West End, at the National Theatre and in the US. TV includes ten years at the BBC and extensive freelance work. She is also a tutor and specialist on the Royal Central School of Speech and Dramas’ Performance Making course for actors with learning disabilities.

Audio extract:

“I’ve been involved with the Performance Making course at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (a training in performance and devised work for learning disabled students developed in partnership with Access All Areas theatre company). I think some of that’s been brilliant really and, over three years, forty five actors with learning disabilities have been through there and I think from their perspective the idea that they’re walking up the steps of one of the very good drama schools, that they’ve graduated from it and got their diploma, is a fantastic thing for them. They’re part of this mainstream drama school, it’s very well resourced, and that’s been very good and a huge confidence boost for those people with learning disabilities who have been marginalised. I don’t think you have to be trained, however I think it’s good as it creates confidence for your work as an actor and it does give you skills. At the moment I’m working for Graeae, as I often do, and you can’t get into their auditions unless you have a physical sensory or learning disability. And it’s so bloody relaxing, everyone is disabled, they can’t get in there unless they are and it’s wonderful because I don’t have to be a persuader, I don’t have to say take a risk, the risk is already taken and supported. I think training is good.”

“When I think about the routes in, integrating someone with a learning disability, or other disabilities, the question has to be why aren’t the drama schools doing it more? There needs to be a massive push on that I think because then more people know it’s possible to be an actor and that’s important.”
Actors

The Silent Approach is fundamentally about the craft of acting and actors are at the centre of the work.

Dark Horse actors Rebekah Hill, Alice Rogers, Joe Sproulle and Toy Meredith were joined by non-learning disabled actors Claudia Harrison and Jack Condon to form the integrated acting ensemble for the action research process.

Actor Claudia Harrison worked with Toby Meredith on scenes from A MAN WITH DOWNS SYNDROME TALKS ABOUT LOVE AND TELLS A STORY and Jack Condon worked with Alice Rogers and Rebekah Hill on scenes from HENRY 6TH PART 2 and A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM.

I'd read the brief and familiarised myself with my lines, breaking them down into beats and learning them to the best of my abilities. They were extensive and this was a challenge. I had no expectations as to the process apart from the fact that the room would be focused and all present would be involved on an equal footing. I made a decision to be open to an entirely new way of working.

I found day one, particularly Vanessa's warm up, to be incredibly rich. It was the most effective method of building ensemble that I have ever been part of. The warm up became totally organic as it sensitively moves the performer from the private inner life of the individual, to the collective experience of the group and then seamlessly into the creative and imaginative work of the ensemble. This is done by a convention of strong leadership by Vanessa, quietly and without fuss, as she slowly builds the ensemble from individual to individual, using eye contact, breath and collective movement, until the room feels entirely complicit in the creative whole.

The use of music is vital as it takes the pressure off the participant at the start to be “interesting” or force any creative state. It provides the ensemble with an immediate shared experience and focus. It was comforting and reassuring at a time when even the most experienced workshop participants can find it hard to move their work from the constant self-monitoring into a present and creative ensemble.

When we began to work with the text there were some challenges. There were language difficulties for some of the actors, and it was new to work at a far slower pace. However it meant that we were all encouraged to listen more, be more specific and work harder to reach out to affect the other performer.

It was a relief to cut out all the distraction that comes so frequently into rehearsal spaces. The half an hour chat at the start of the day, and the power of personalities to get in the way of the ensemble can lead to a lack of focus and the creative space of the rehearsal room becomes bland. It's harder to work in these distracting environments as one becomes self-conscious and less able to be in the moment and present.

I would say that working directly with Toby meant that I had to be accurate and have a structured framework to my performance so that he felt safe knowing that at certain moments he knew what was coming.
This is not a bad thing for any actor as it stops you becoming self indulgent, and makes your performance active. He was an excellent physical presence of stillness and if I didn’t engage him directly I knew he would stop listening and we would have lost our dynamic. This made me again very present and specific, and raised the stakes. I had to be present and alive as there was also a sense that we may go off book and improvise our exchanges at certain points. I would say that being open and clear and focused is absolutely important. Listening is key.

I think some of the work that centred too much on the finesse of language and it’s complicated and multi layered meaning was a challenge to some of the actors with learning disabilities. Technically it’s delivery demands verbal skill which highlighted a difference in the actors, rather than what we all shared and could be equal in. However in our scene, I think this became part of the narrative and experience for the audience.

The performance was, as ever, nerve wracking but fantastic.

*That* is the story, how do we effectively communicate together when language sometimes gets in the way of truth?

“*I would like to see The Silent Approach adopted in all rehearsal rooms as it is an ensemble /actor centred approach which I see as the root of all creative theatre work.*”

The Silent Approach was immediately wholly engaging. The focused atmosphere in the room was palpable; it was definitely a sacred place for work, the outside world seemed to cease to exist.

It asked me to engage deeply and truthfully with my inner drives, intuition and instinct. The work was raw and visceral partly because we spent no time whatsoever discussing and exploring the text in a cerebral way. I think working with this immediacy was part of the reason why we got so much done in a very short space of time.

A committed presence in the room is essential (to all acting really, but particularly so here). There’s no space for allowing your mind to wonder outside of the room. It’s vital to stay inside each evolving moment, alive and awake to the next offer. You can’t work with a ‘guard up’ either, there’s no time for it, an open playfulness is vital to the collaborative process.

The intensity of the working day surprised me. I don’t think I’ve been part of a process before that asked for such a honed focus. It was both inspiring and exhausting in equal measure.

That intensity creates a rich work space where volumes of exciting art can be created swiftly and effectively.

“*I think it’s a brilliant way of working. It’s a mind-set and an attitude too and I’ll be taking it forward into all my future projects.*”
Those involved in the project and assembled guests were bowled over by the process and work, with the use of silence as a rehearsal tool having particular resonance in our ‘wordy’ sector. We all have such a lot to learn from each other to truly capture the diversity and talent out there, and this project encapsulated the ways of working and exchange required to affect real change, based around artists and work, rather than fanciful words.”

Jamie Beddard/Ramps On The Moon
Rehearsing theatre productions using the Silent Approach

The Silent Approach has been successfully used as a method for rehearsing integrated drama (featuring actors with and without learning disabilities) which has played out to general audiences.

Post the RADA showing four actors who’ve toured nationally in integrated productions HYPOTHERMIA and SING SOMETHING SIMPLE wrote their responses to the work.

Attending the results of the two-day workshop at RADA was an invigorating and deeply contemplative experience, having worked this way previously. It was clear as a previous practitioner the methods used in rehearsal (the Silent Approach) were woven into the scenes that were presented. My first experience of The Silent Approach was in the Hypothermia rehearsal room; it opened up huge possibilities for me as an actor and what can be achieved within a play. Talk and analysing a text is essentially realised outside of the rehearsal space, upon entry into said rehearsal room, the space shifts to an area of acute exploration both emotionally and physically. Actors are off book before the process begins allowing them a freer approach to embodying scenes as they play out, the approach offers a deeper connection to other actors in the space. The results in full production in professional theatre settings moved, inspired, shocked and awed audiences.

Without doubt I have taken aspects of this work into other rehearsal rooms and working film environments.

Johnny Vivash/Actor

Working using the ‘Silent Approach’ enables you to fully immerse yourself in the moment, concerned only with the actors around you, reacting both physically and mentally with an open heart and mind. There is no time or space to question why, just to go with it, explore and enjoy the freedom to create.

Faye Billling/Actor

Watching Separate Doors 2, I was really struck by the intensity of the actors connection with their scene partners. The connection was always held, in important part, through eye contact, keeping the actors ‘in the moment’ and keeping us on the edge of our seats. We were truly sharing that moment. We were in that space. I recognised that visceral quality from Hypothermia. As a non learning-disabled actor, in preparing for rehearsals for Hypothermia, it was important to be on top of the text from the outset. You needed to be able to keep up with the pace. You needed to be ready to be and to do. The Silent Approach requires that every one of the ensemble members is freed up, so that they can connect with one another whilst finding, exploring and playing with character.

I remember the Hypothermia rehearsals, and later the performances, as being such exciting, surprising spaces where the work was always alive with possibilities.

Margaret Fraser/Actor

I was lucky enough to tour with the show Sing Something Simple twice. I wouldn’t ordinarily do a show twice but I felt I wanted another go at the show and wanted to explore the process more deeply a second time. And I’m really glad I did.

The Silent Approach is rewarding and it feels liberating to be so intensely focused.

Heather Dutton/Actor
Assistant Directors
Assistant Director Hannah Sharkey shares her notebook.

First meeting!
The first time I met Vanessa was at the interview for the assistant director role. We met on the top floor of The National, looked out over London and plotted Separate Doors world domination! I’m kidding (kinda) we discussed the aim to reignite enthusiasm for, and commitment to, integrated work featuring trained actors with learning disabilities; simple really. It makes perfect sense to me, we all share a world and we should share a stage, a story and a show. However in reality it’s not so easy, things need to change on both micro and macro levels, we need new skills, we need to be brave and take risks, we need support from venues, directors, writers, casting directors and funding bodies, as with any significant change we need people to come together and fight with us. I felt and feel that Vanessa’s drive, determination and the clarity of her aims are a force to be reckoned with.
So no, not world domination, I wasn’t being interviewed for a position as a mini me but I also wasn’t just signing up just to take notes and mark entrances and exits, I was being asked if I had the skill and the drive to be a part of this vital push for change.

Pre project RADA meeting notes
The initial creative team meeting was very helpful for all involved. It provided lots of information and a space to set aims and air worries! and it began to give us an insight into the Silent Approach.
People said what they were looking forward to and their expectations. Geoff said he gets asked why RADA achieves such high standards and he says RADA is so good because ‘we learn together.’ This is hugely manifest in this.

Day 1
Vanessa and the Dark Horse actors lead us in a warm up that is unique to the Silent Approach. I’ve worked hard to build a connected ensemble many times before and it has never been as instantaneous as this. This successful connection wasn’t down to the ritualistic warm up alone; it was down to the energy and commitment of the Dark Horse actors. As Vanessa guided us through the next part of the day the Silent Approach became more clear. Scaling the language used right back and replacing it with other forms of communication. For example replacing wordy conversations with carefully constructed images.
After our morning masterclass the other members of the creative team each ran a session with the ensemble looking at particular elements of the performance or text and and they began to implement these techniques.

In the post show forum, when we could all safely mark our successes, there was a lot of discussion of the nerves that the creative team and cast had felt when stepping into the space on that first day. For each of us this manifested itself in different ways; but what it boils down to is the fear of the unknown. Oh and the pressure that it’s at blooming RADA!

Notes written on the tube:
I feel like both my mind and body have had a good work out! It was fantastic to learn more about the Silent Approach and to be taught by the creative team from RADA. The fact that everyone in the room was asked to join in added to the open energy created by the warm up. The Dark Horse actors’ skills really shone in stage presence and physical improvisation. In the Shakespeare session, where I think a lot was new to them, they remained focused and determined to deliver.

Day 2
We began again with the same warm up from day one; segments were also used to refocus and seal off one exercise before we moved onto the next. It was great to have some time to gather your thoughts before each new task! Next up Vanessa blocked all the scenes that would be in the showing. Up until the afternoon of day 2 the process has been lead by Vanessa, with time clearly allocated or handed over to other tutors to lead. At this point however, as we started to ‘work’ the material, the creative team were invited to jump in whenever they felt they wanted
Tricky bit!

It’s important that the actors in the ensemble who don’t have learning disabilities stick to the blocking that is set out early on. Usually there is more flexibility and room for exploration at this stage in the process but it became clear that a few key points of blocking made a bit difference to the quality of the performance. If the parameters change each time the Dark Horse actors adapt but it didn’t set them up for their performance, when the blocking was cemented it offered a clear path through the narrative for these actors.

to. Input was tentative at first, but gradually each tutor offered ideas and directed sections of the work. It was very interesting to see how each tutor implemented what we had learned of the Silent Approach into their own practice. They began by using the methods that we had seen Vanessa use and there was a palpable excitement in the air when they yielded good results! As that excitement grew it was joined by a feeling of discovery and exploration. Things were tried out, some successful and some not so successful; in that they did not get the result from the actor that the director was hoping for. However I think these are still positive discoveries.

More notes written on the tube!

We probably trod paths that Vanessa has been down before, but she refrained from shouting ‘No not that way! I gave you a map please follow it and stop getting distracted by interesting scenery!’ We were exploring and finding things out for ourselves, the best way to learn!

Day 2.5

After the warm up we worked the material again and came to that point you get in every process where you get excited as you realise that it isn’t going to be rubbish! In fact it’s going to be quite good, in fact if you just tweak this and that then it will be very good! (really hoping that’s not just me). This partnered with the teams’ overnight reflection and realisation that they all had had success at the Silent Approach the day before meant for a moment, just a moment, we all got a bit excited, a bit less Silent Approach a bit more circus!

The showing

Final notes written on the tube!
There was a real buzz in the room right from the off. The audience was warm and receptive and I think really impressed!

There was a lot of talk about fear in the industry. People are afraid of risk, always the next show when you will be established enough to take that chance. I completely understand that! However I think if artists were to be trained, as we have begun to be, in the Silent Approach, or worked with a Vanessa in the rehearsal room, then that risk would be incredibly minimal! These are trained actors with a lot of experience and a whole lot to give. They don’t have to be the focus of your piece, they can be butler number 4, or they can play the lead.

Today’s audience and that discussion proved there is a thirst for this. The Dark Horse actors proved there is the talent. Now we need the writers to believe that they can write the parts and directors to trust that they can work these and other talented actors with learning difficulties into their rehearsal process.

I can’t wait for the opportunity to use the Silent Approach myself, to direct the Dark Horse actors and other actors with learning disabilities. I for one am excited to see what’s next and what’s possible.

Assistant Director and actor
Michael Lyle on the work

As both performer and assistant director I was reminded of the importance of specificity and simplicity. I would argue, the most important aspect of performance is connection; whether that be with a fellow performer, creative or audience member.

Working in silence, I felt, enabled me to do away with any potential ‘pfaff’ and allow myself and the room to find true connection. This was exemplified in the fantastical work of the ‘Dark Horse’ actors. I was and still am, truly inspired by their level of focus and intention; both of which I would argue all creatives of varying abilities, throughout all mediums, could benefit from.

Although only a three day period, I honestly have taken away far more from the process than I could ever have expected; it has urged me to strive to be a better performer.
Film Director Jane Gull on breaking the ‘us and them’ barrier

Panel speaker Jane Gull talks about casting and working with Steven Brandon, an actor with Downs Syndrome in her feature film MY FERAL HEART

Audio extract:

“Maybe we need to open up the pool of directors and producers and everybody, to make it more inclusive because if that director (referenced by a previous speaker-ed.) is saying ‘that’s scary to me’ maybe they’re not the right director for the job, because there are plenty of directors I think that would do an amazing job that maybe aren’t given the opportunity. Three years ago I was presented with an idea for the script for MY FERAL HEART and the lead character in the script had Downs Syndrome (actually when I first got it the character with Downs Syndrome wasn’t the lead character but when I read it I said he’s much more interesting he should be the lead and the writer said OK and we changed it). Then I was looking for an actor to play the part and I went through Spotlight and had 70 actors submitted but only had 3 actors with Downs Syndrome. Its an independent film with a low budget so I was ideally looking for an actor who was based local to me and to the film set. I found over the last couple of years since making the film is a number of things I was completely unaware of before but which I hadn’t given any thought to when we started filming. I realise I’m actually using a lot of the techniques Vanessa’s talking about without realising. I literally got hold of the script and cut everything out of it before giving it to Steven (the actor), he didn’t need all the detailed descriptions just the actions and I spent time working with him because he’d never acted before. I saw the film as a feature film, not a special case film, or a disability film but when we were making the film we were sending it to sound agents and distributors and they weren’t taking it seriously as a film until they’d watched it and that’s been really interesting. I’ve been all around the world with the film, with Steven, we’ve been to Russia and Singapore and goodness knows where but I keep meeting the same people and we went to Moscow and we were on the panel with RJ Mitte from Breaking Bad and I said to him wow you must get no end of work since Breaking Bad it was such a success and he said no, he spends a lot of time attending disability festivals and events talking about breaking down barriers. Incredible. I think it starts from the training and from a young age being inclusive. The place where I met Steven is the Mushroom theatre company and it’s a wonderful place full of talented people and a friend who has two small children asked what theatre school should she send her children and I said go there and she said won’t they be held back? And I said no its inclusive and if you do that from a young age you’re not going to have this us and them which is what I’ve found.”
Reality Check: the obstacles

The kind of theatre I make and that hopefully will be encouraged through this project is written and made by people with something to say to everyone about the human condition entire. The key is in the integration of casts and the lack of compromise where talent and excellence is concerned.

The RADA event raised some of the complexities and anxieties around training and casting actors with learning disabilities.

Four indicative obstacles quoted anonymously from written feedback are answered by the author.

**Obstacle 1:**
The challenges involved in working with actors with learning disabilities and the demands made of other actors working in an inclusive process make it too difficult to be viable in anything other than a community/therapeutic context. Professional expectations are unrealistic and/or lip service.

“Based on my experience of working with Dark Horse, I’ve witnessed the intense frustration of another actor at working with someone who has a learning disability, and in truth found it challenging myself at times. There does need to be more conversation, more open and honest discussion.”
VB: In the course of writing and directing integrated work for general audiences and national touring I’ve cast two non learning disabled actors who’ve really struggled with the process, in spite of very open and honest discussions prior to the rehearsal periods involved but I don’t think you can really grasp this work and the impact it might have on you unless you’re actually doing it. In both instances, both were actors whose work I admired and who I also liked very much as people, I didn’t anticipate problems pre production but once in rehearsal the exposing ask of the approach, doing a bookless run on the first day, working without the pressure relief of breaks to chat, the high level of management required to support the learning disabled actors to achieve to maximum capability and the need directorially to prioritise and channel the scene work of these actors proved impossible to cope with for both. Watching actors battle stress and discomfort during the early stages of rehearsal is plain awful and has to be resolved swiftly. In the first instance the rehearsal process was pulled into a more traditional format resulting in generous compromise from a learning disabled scene partner and in the second the actor was given a week long break from the schedule mid rehearsal and post this came in solely for performances and again an uneasy process compromise was reached, though demands for ‘separate’ rehearsals weren’t met.

I’ve learned a lot about not taking for granted the challenges made of actors in working this way, and the pressures on actors who potentially have never previously spent any time at all with people with learning disabilities. I try very hard to give actors a good taste of the work before signing up and to test the edges of the prejudices which we all have and I’m ready to bend if need be for the sake of achieving high production standards- no one’s served by poor work.

This RADA process has allowed me to look at how far the approach can stretch into traditional verbal practice and it’s a very delicate balancing act. Sometimes in order to ensure that actors with learning disabilities reach their full potential in front of an audience the power simply has to be removed from others; finding actors, both disabled and non-disabled, with the generosity of spirit and trust to allow this to happen, is key to success, as it is in any ensemble context.

**Obstacle 2:**
The inability of learning disabled actors to reach understood professional standards in terms of technical skills means their work and the shows that they’re in will never be that good.

“I had some particular thoughts about voice. What always strikes me is the extreme difficulty for actors with Down Syndrome in delivering lines naturally. I think it’s largely due to the persistent hearing problems, but the intonation is almost always flat, staccato and unvaried (another example was on TV on Sunday with Grantchester, where an actor with Down Syndrome had a key role). It was very noticeable to me that actually the best delivery came from Joe today at RADA when he was saying the Ariel speech. I talked to the voice coach about this, who said he had him singing the lines.”

“I worry that when we have this conversation around acting it’s always assumed that it’s something anyone can do. For example, we would never push for learning disabled actors to be in orchestras because the high level of technical accomplishment required of musicians is obvious. The truth is that most people can’t act. It is also true that acting is a very sophisticated cognitive process. It didn’t feel like that could be said out loud in the room yesterday, especially with the Dark Horse actors present. I believe very strongly that talented actors with learning disabilities should be supported within our industry to fulfil their potential. I also think that audiences should see diversity in casting on the stage in front of them. But we need to be careful that in making the arguments we don’t inadvertently undermine the level of artistry and technical ability required for good acting. I wish someone had pointed out that it’s a tough business for actors with ‘normal’ cognitive function and that everyone has a limited casting range.
VB: I completely agree re: the skill, complexity, craft and training required to do the job of acting. There are very few actors with learning disabilities capable of work in standard contexts, some who do give technically inept performances which sets everything back for everyone and again ‘the fear’ means no one is honest about it and no one progresses. Process has to be adapted and the journey even for trained actors with learning disabilities tightly managed. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be or can’t be done. Encouraging we on the business side delivering to audience facing objectives and managing risk to adapt technique to include and work collaboratively is very challenging and will only ever happen in rarefied areas but in spite of all that I feel it’s important and that new general audience work really should reflect and include these characters and stories where its creatively positive. There was a lot of talk during the RADA discussions about ‘disability’ and progress being made in including disability in general programmes but learning disability isn’t included at all, especially moderate learning disability where people have limited speech, because it’s so much harder to do and demands more of everyone involved. Text heavy work and expecting actors with moderate learning disabilities to miraculously become people they’re not, to be ‘normalised’ and to be able to deliver to it is absolutely not the answer and isn’t the aim of integrated work. There’s a middle way. Playwrights can craft scenes to facilitate protagonists with limited dialogue and impactful roles can be framed and stories told without or with little text. To extrapolate on your orchestra analogy; the aim is to have the orchestra working with some entirely new instruments and an Avant-garde conductor, playing new symphonies in the usual concert hall to the standard audience up for hearing something innovative and excellent. Playwrights and directors are the next step in channelling those new compositions.

Obstacle 3:
Style and content, who wants to see the work? It’s only ever going to be a niche interest.

“If I’m entirely honest I wouldn’t choose to see a play with a character with learning disabilities in it or any show really that’s about disability. I don’t want to be confronted like that and it usually is confrontational and I’ve seen some bad work from disability companies, low quality, crap, where all the people in the room are all saying it’s brilliant and you feel like you’re in a parallel universe. The acting today was OK but it usually isn’t where learning disability is concerned and I don’t know how you get over that.”

VB: Drama can contain a narrative featuring disability without the work being about disability and I think it’s in these narratives, rather than through didactics, that debate and positive challenge can be very potent, especially for general audiences for whom serial drama is a cultural more. TV indicates how successful naturalistic soap has been in representing people with learning (and other) disabilities, however in theatre some disability focused initiatives have encouraged identity compartmentalisation resulting in a separation of audiences for this work on stage. It should be possible to have the two very different forms, disability arts performance work and general audience theatre work but it often isn’t as theatre and disability is now often construed as an ‘issue to be debated’ rather than being connected to a larger narrative. It’s a complex situation but it does bear analysis as it can mean talented people with disabilities don’t get to work with other talented theatre people (as has happened here at RADA) because they don’t belong to the same identity group. I know and have worked with extraordinary talents with learning disabilities, striking imaginations and superb physical storytellers who have thrived in collaboration with exceptional crafts people, this wouldn’t have happened if they’d remained confined to their communities and the artistic skill sets predominating there. There is talent out there that deserves training like that offered at RADA and the opportunity to work with other creative professionals. The kind
of theatre I make and that hopefully will be encouraged through this project is written and made by
people with something to say to everyone about the human condition entire. The key is in the
integration of casts and the lack of compromise where talent and excellence is concerned. It takes a lot
of work and commitment but it can be done and then I think many people will want to see the work
because they simply want to see a great piece of theatre especially if it’s made in collaboration with
attractive and known creatives from all and any areas of theatre excellence.

Obstacle 4:
Actors with learning disabilities can never earn money in the usual way so talking about
professionalism is redundant.

“During the panel discussion it was said that an aim for actors with learning disabilities is to earn money.
Actors with moderate learning disabilities are in receipt of benefits so I don’t really understand that. I
know of someone whose carers declared the money he’d made doing a film and he had his benefits
stopped and it was a mess. We need to be honest about this, these actors are never going to either earn
enough to support themselves or earn in the usual way.”

VB: It’s true that the economic realities for actors with learning disabilities are specific and often different
from those for deaf actors for example or people with neurological differences who are high
functioning and this is another area where it can be unhelpful to mix all ‘disability’ up together.
Financially rewarding actors with moderate learning disabilities for professional work is managed in
ways which don’t interfere with each individual’s financial stability. The companies who support and train
these actors (such as Separate Doors collaborators Access All Areas, Dark Horse, Hijinx and Hubbub) are
expert at dealing with these matters. A very good reason beyond intrinsic artistic value to engage these
specialist companies to consult and assist their actors. There’s not enough space here to debate
professionalism versus salary but equating artistic excellence with pecuniary status is a road to nowhere
worth going to.
“I found the day really useful as space and time for me to learn about Vanessa’s approach and for me to reflect on how we work in Derby with actors with learning disabilities through our work with such companies as Hubbub. Vanessa is clearly an expert in the area and I found the Silent Approach discussion really interesting. I’d value learning more about this.”

Sarah Brigham/
Artistic Director Derby Theatre
Charlotte Bevan on a positive future at the National Theatre.

Formerly a Casting Associate at the National Theatre, Charlotte now leads on their Creative Diversity Project, developing ambitious targets for increasingly representative performers, writers and other artists.

Audio extract:

‘Hearing about the Silent Approach was extraordinary and it was amazing to watch these brilliant actors doing what they do so brilliantly. A bit of me, however worries that larger scale rehearsal rooms and processes can be resistant to change, to slowing down the pace, and it would take a meaningful zoom out and refocus in order to incorporate and tailor the approach into a process that already exists and get those two things to meet in the middle. My project at the National is broad and wonderfully experimental. One of the things I’m doing is trying to bring the attention of casting directors and directors to a pool of deaf and disabled talent they may not have come across before. In order to do this, I thought it would be useful to create a video database of any actor who identifies as deaf or disabled so that when directors come to you and say “I’d love to cast more inclusively but I don’t know any actors in that pool” you can say, “look on this website and you’ll see up to 100 actors acting, all of whom identify as d/Deaf or disabled”, hence taking away one of the many excuses we hear for not casting inclusively. It’s a way to bash down those excuses as and when they come up and it’s easy for me to say because I’m not a director but I do know – particularly somewhere as high profile as the National – that there is a fear of getting it wrong, and an instinct to protect what think you know and the control that you need to have over it, which often doesn’t allow for anything unfamiliar or seemingly risky. A lot of people are just very fearful about getting it wrong more generally in terms of disability, whether it is in a social, conversational or professional setting - an alarm bell goes off and makes people go ‘I’m not the person to do that’ and of course I understand it – as we’ve all been in that position in life.’

“What’s been great about Rufus Norris being at the National is he’s enabled and empowered us to try new things, knowing that if we get it wrong, we’ll try and do better next time – but we will at least have learned something along the way. This makes it much easier to be fearless and give something a go that you might not have done in a different environment.”
Playwriting and playwrights

Shakespeare the writer/actor/manager no doubt wrote with particular actors in mind, those contained within his company. Had any of those actors been actors with learning disabilities it’s likely they would have played neither Lysander nor Prospero but would instead have turned in fine fairies and acrobatic boatswains and played the leads in his highly physical revival of Macbeth collaborating with a mumming troupe from Belgium.

The route to integration for actors with learning disabilities within mainstream casts isn’t through a mirroring of standard acting processes/technical skills or a parity of casting but through a parity of opportunity. It’s at the conception stage of the theatre making process where real innovation can happen, the place where pioneering writers and directors can break new ground and include actors with learning disabilities; at the creation point, when the first vision is being formed.

On Day 1 of the RADA action research process, watching esteemed director Geoff Bullen lead a dynamic workshop exploring Shakespeare’s rhythms within the iambic pentameter, a clear disparity existed between ensemble members with and without learning disabilities.

Ditching the text itself and physicalising the ‘beats’ within words the tutors, assistant directors and actors Claudia and Jack, hit the stresses and improvised movement precisely and imaginatively, listening and developing the work as it passed from person to person. The Dark Horse actors however didn’t work in the same way, they took an idea of the sounds being offered but instead of using the vocal and aural pattern given changed the shape, mutated the scansion and entirely changed the rhythmic ball as it rolled along.

The way these actors both heard and translated the text was not the same as the way the other actors heard and translated the text and therefore the outcome wasn’t the same.

Within this exercise lay the unspoken nub of the matter; actors with Downs Syndrome hear and work with text in an entirely different way from actors without Downs Syndrome, the reasons for that, based on the specifics of physiology due to an extra chromosome aren’t for dissection in a non scientific report but the fact is that the two kinds of actors are never going to work with text in the same way, following the same linguistic patterns. The logical conclusion therefore is that inclusion in text based work has to mean a true collaboration and a stylistic meeting in the middle.

Playwrights can craft that bridge.

35.
The knowledge that both kinds of actors speak a different theatrical tongue doesn’t negate either’s skills or potential to reach a general audience with high expectations; it simply calls for a new mutual language to be acquired, a dramatic Esperanto, to bridge the gap.

My first experience of working with actors with learning disabilities was with text and dialogue, as a playwright (the director came along later excited by what the writer was up to) and this project returns to those literary roots to question integration in general audience facing text based drama and how to make it work.

Many years ago, working on a short-term project looking at the possibilities of engaging actors with learning disabilities used only to devising, onto text; meeting those actors for the first time and dissecting the sensitive permutations of character choice that writing process entails, was both inspiring and revelatory.

My experiences prior to that, working to commission and sometimes to brief, shaping plays for specific seasons and producers, working with an eye to the commercial, prioritising (as I still do) a satisfying audience experience ahead of any concept of process, meant this work with actors who didn’t have a sense of responsibility to a ‘play’ or even an audience, unravelled every part of my writing jumper and, post experiments with earphones, feeding text into bewildered actors ears which they had no hope of replicating, and teutonic line-readings, resulted in a realisation that an entirely new way of working had to be created in order to offer the actors involved a satisfying creative challenge and an audience an outcome worthy of the ticket price.

Post this initial short term inclusive experiment my writing life returned to the standard mix of comedy sketch output and generating ideas for commission but curiosity and a glimpse through a door into an intriguing world stayed with me.

Stumbling across material relating to Nazi eugenics policy and relating it to this experience of working with people with learning disabilities led to the germ of an idea for a play- Hypothermia- and a series of questions which fundamentally informed the Silent Approach.

How do you write a narrative drama with a central protagonist with Downs Syndrome? How do you do this in a way which doesn’t compromise a known concept of quality? How do you this to deliver maximum impact for a ‘mainstream’ audience? How do you write for an ‘integrated’ cast?

Breaking down the dynamics of plot and story to enable a character with little speech to carry a drama isn’t new, however doing this in a way that...
also offers ‘safety’ for an actor with cognitive differences (who finds cues offered verbally or visually but doesn’t recall them autonomously) was new, and for this dramatist offered compelling first draft challenges. The resonance of the actors’ state on stage also came into play dramatically; an actor with Downs Syndrome packs an extraordinary punch for an audience, way beyond his/her presence ‘in scene’, measuring and utilising that, in terms of an audiences attitudinal reaction to the character’s activity was part of the work too.

Crafting the first draft involved an imagined consciousness of the natural state of my actor with Downs Syndrome, an awareness of his reactions and manner of observation which, when allied with the motivations of the character he was playing led to a de-construction of scene building that was entirely visual rather than literary, there was an aim to see more acutely than usual through the eyes of the character. I’m a playwright who ‘sees’ the on stage action I write, usually from a position about two to three metres away, positioned slightly above the people in the scene. This ‘seeing’ of the movements of my character, in reaction to the movements and emotional objectives of other characters in the scene led to the beginnings of the Silent Approach (once the director had caught up with the writer and come along to join in with the process).

In the early stages of directing integrated productions using the Silent Approach I use a very similar process. Offering visual images and sound cues to establish given circumstances (the writers imagined and written vision of a scene) actors are then directed to move and react in the space minus text until it feels right to drop the pre learned dialogue in. The director chips the lines of the learning-disabled actor into this physical construct and this actor repeats and learns in situ, kinesthetically.

Beyond the liberating disciplines afforded to view the world and the stage in an entirely different way writing for actors with learning disabilities has also offered vast leaps of context and conceit not usually reachable or even believable when writing with actors without learning disabilities in mind.

Writing for ensembles of actors with learning disabilities, working with the destabilising impact of eight actors with Downs Syndrome delivering to an audience, has offered forays into genetic mutancy (a colony of half ants half humans), post apocalyptic animism (feral wolf pack humans) and a dystopic wild west. These bold leaps into extreme imagined worlds, married with the Silent Approach, deliver spine-tinglingly different experiences for audiences.

Learning disability focused companies working with narrative in the UK grow in confidence and ability; offering established playwrights the opportunity to work with these companies will ignite progressive movement across the board towards general audiences.

Writers and directors will find their own processes to facilitate integration but this will only happen via supported exposure to exceptional actors with learning disabilities.
“I was most impressed by the level of focus at the RADA event and therefore meaning coming from the very different pieces and it was inspiring to hear about the Silent Approach. When I wrote ONCE WE WERE MOTHERS, a play with a character who has Downs Syndrome, my research had led me to have flexible expectations of whoever the actor was who would eventually play FLORA and I went into rehearsals fully prepared to adapt the text. Had we been working together before I put finger to keyboard, and if I’d seen the work I saw today at RADA with the Silent Approach workshop, I think I would have appreciated more the power of silence. These actors displayed real power in their concentration which was both refreshing and exciting and led me to believe that this was true for both the learning disabled and regular actors involved. Sharing skills is such a potent part of rehearsals and I particularly appreciated this ‘focus on the work and in the room’ method of working which makes the space itself become a stage and a place of discovery. A key ingredient seems to me to be preparation, both for director and actors so that a lot of work has been done prior to day one of rehearsals, including being off book which makes such a difference to the quality of what one can achieve in a limited rehearsal time. As a playwright I would be very happy if all performers turned up on day one with at least a very thorough working knowledge of the text.”

Lisa Evans/Playwright

“The RADA event and hearing about the Silent Approach was a fascinating and rewarding afternoon. I believe very strongly that talented actors with learning disabilities should be supported within our industry to fulfil their potential. I also think that audiences should see diversity in casting on the stage in front of them.”

Debbie McAndrew/Playwright

“The Silent Approach is clearly an amazing shortcut to the nitty gritty of the work we’re trying to achieve as writers, it enables you to reach the essence of what storytelling is effectively. The event at RADA was fascinating. I was interested that the RADA specialists were so taken with the process and that there was so much positivity, perhaps the next time you work together they will see the work more clearly still as the first impression when working with actors with learning disabilities is always very impactful. There’s so much potential in this work for writers, directors and venues- perhaps there needs to be an initiative similar to NT connections where established playwrights explore characters and situations which normative processes dis-allow.”

Judith Johnson/Playwright

Different experiences and ways of being have to be as acceptable as obvious differences like disability and ability. We always look to our cultural expressions to learn more about being human, the disability question is no different -‘We’ are the story, the story is ‘Us’. It’s a relief that small steps continue to cover much ground, it is the only way to go. The performance (at RADA) was great. There need to be more opportunities like this where acceptable norms and hierarchies are challenged in a relaxed and illuminating way, making connections with people in order to go beyond perceptions.

Esther Wilson/Playwright
Impact: the Separate Doors 1 Directors

SEPARATE DOORS 1 highlighted the work of four learning disability focused companies in the UK, all of whom both train actors and produce touring theatre.

The first report was distributed widely in print and digital format to NPO’s, venues, producers and funders.

**Nick Llewellyn/Access All Areas/London**
The Separate Doors 1 process and report helped us to structure our overall artistic development and future research that we’re creating with our associate artists into the future of learning disabled actor training. The articulation of these practices and a shared platform is always important to have. It’s fundamental to ensure our work is being taken seriously and to ensure continued professional development of artists. Non-Disabled actors are given many opportunities for training, so it is imperative that learning-disabled actors can access high quality training in professional environments. It’s also important to work together and to value different styles of training and performance to ensure that the actors are being represented in ways they want to be.

**Lynda Hornsby/Dark Horse/Huddersfield**
Discussion and debate around the lack of opportunity for people with learning disabilities to train and work in the performing arts is always welcome. Separate Doors 1 helped, alongside other initiatives such as Arts Council England’s Creative case for Diversity, Unlimited and Ramps on the Moon to create awareness about the lack of diversity represented on our stages. We are pleased to see an increase in opportunity for deaf and disabled actors and performers and those from BAME backgrounds as part of integrated casts. We are yet to see any significant increase in learning disability representation, other than in work created by companies that specialise in this area and that is why Separate Doors and the work we and others do to change that is vitally important.

**Ben Pettitt-Wade/Hijinx/Cardiff**
Separate Doors 1 put us all in a much stronger position to be able to lobby for recognition of the work we and our artists do. I’ve always felt that inclusive theatre is a style of theatre of its’ own, with a particular ethos, we may take different approaches in achieving what we do but the aim is to create work that promotes complete equality. I think by bringing different organisations together Separate Doors is giving us- and others- more of a voice. Training is vitally important. It is vitally important for any artist to have access to high quality training. It is just much more difficult for an artist with a learning disability to access it. Casting is now the big question for us. We’ve just launched our own agency to promote our performers but it still feels like the industry still has a long way to go before it understands how to be accessible when casting performers with learning disability.

**Jen Sumner/Hubbub Derby**
Separate Doors 1 had a big impact for me and for Hubbub. It put us on the map within the learning disability theatre world, which, as a new company, was of great value within a national context. It also opened up conversations with the other companies which have led to them being part of our action research in the first year of our Arts Council Elevate funding, leading to the launch of a 4 year actor training offer for adults with learning disabilities in Derby. All actors, learning disabled actors too, need some form of training - whether formal or ‘on the job. There are national debates around many other topics. Theatre with a learning disability focus is often in the shadows and Separate Doors is a great opportunity to shed some light on great practice going on and also bring together companies and artists.
Final thoughts for future change

Actor training

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art brought world leading expertise to the Separate Doors 2 project, resulting in a robust and revelatory examination of the Silent Approach. As a consequence RADA is considering options for the future integration of acting students with and without learning disabilities.

Actors with moderate learning disabilities will never train in the same way as actors without learning disabilities however there is value for all in some crossover. The Silent Approach may offer a route into inclusivity and integrated classes for some aspects of vocational training; especially in voice and movement.

The development of skills and learning for conservatoire tutors and directors in the Silent Approach as a means of increasing opportunities for inclusive practise is of intrinsic value and also of value to the broader industry.

Integrated actor training offers student actors, with and without disabilities, the opportunity to learn from each other, preparing all for tomorrows’ film sets and rehearsal rooms, in the more inclusive theatre, film and TV environments of tomorrow.

Casting

Separate Doors 2 panel speakers Sarah Hughes and Charlotte Bevan both isolated fear as the principal obstacle in the way of producers and directors’ casting actors with learning disabilities, fear of the unknown and of ‘saying the wrong thing’ and a sense of the risks involved being far too challenging and exposing.

In event feedback attendees expressed a desire for further focused events where the Silent Approach can be seen in practise and where mainstream producers can meet and learn from the companies and practitioners who work with vocational actors with learning disabilities.

A further feedback suggestion was for director and writer focused opportunities supported by leading venues/organisations to learn about the Silent Approach and to interrogate more deeply the practicalities of casting actors with learning disabilities.
Production

There are theatre makers in the UK with the skill, experience and ambition to produce new work featuring actors with learning disabilities which plays out to general audiences, reflecting aspects of the whole of society to people sitting in auditoriums whose view is less panoramic.

More writers and directors need to be given the confidence and learning to be able to consider actors with learning disabilities as a diversity casting option, alongside actors with physical disabilities and deaf actors.

Talent isn’t related to anyone’s physical, intellectual or emotional being. Some people are extremely imaginatively gifted and some people aren’t. Searching for disproportionate quantities of talent in a slim demographic won’t work. Talent is extremely rare. Talent can happen anywhere to anyone and most usually doesn’t. Being male and wealthy doesn’t equal being talented, neither does being female and learning disabled.

In theatre perhaps the answer to better representation is to give opportunities to as many people as possible and the means to work with as many kinds of people as possible in the hope that whoever is most talented, most creatively gifted, in this refreshed artistic democracy, will assume the role that best fits their skills, without a thought for the shape they make and the space they take in the world.

Theatre for most audiences begins and ends with the actors on stage and making the faces we see there more representative is the first, vital, base to reach.

Breaking down the walls of identity theatre and making exceptional new work and forward-thinking revivals, where all kinds of actors play characters in front of general audiences is the next logical step, across the board, not just via initiatives but in all theatre programmes.

For theatre itself to change, in it’s many faceted, beautifully traditional and yet endlessly porous evolutions the talent which absorbs the world around us, chops it up and re-shapes it into work which offers stark reflections and alternative futures needs opportunities to work with creative raw material on the edges of the human experience, where the most thrilling and uncharted artistic possibilities lie.
Extracts from feedback

‘Producers, writers and directors need more opportunities to meet, engage and break down their fear.’

‘There is a growing energy and momentum behind the need to integrate learning disabled actors into mainstream work.’

‘There needs to be a rollout of training workshops on the Silent Approach in venues across the UK.’

‘I’m a director and it’d be great to have a space to ‘zoom out’ and work with some actors with learning disabilities without having to produce anything for the public.’

‘There needs to be change from all areas. Lets start by having more inclusive training, making sure these actors have the support and the same opportunities as all actors.’

‘There needs to be the creation of more spaces where the room is diverse and people get chances to learn from actors and artists who are different and who are also taken outside of their comfort zone.’

‘The discussion threw up how fear and hierarchy mustn’t be allowed to scupper what there is an obvious appetite for.’

‘We need more exposure. More training. Beating down traditional forms of casting and ways of working with performers.’

‘How do we take the energy and learning out of this space and into the hierarchical/commercial spaces?’

‘It’s time to work in a more focused way, with work written especially for actors with learning disabilities within integrated companies.’

‘Bloody brilliant and inspiring…what’s next?’

email: artistic@vanessabrooks2020.com
“Thank you very much for the event at RADA, it was exhilarating to see the combination of learning disabled actors and RADA students and alumni, and to hear how much all the actors in that company had gained from the experience. I found the description of your Silent Approach in the rehearsal room, and the techniques for putting all actors on an equal footing particularly fascinating. Along with many others we at the New Wolsey Theatre are working towards making our productions as diverse, inclusive and accessible as we can, both on stage and in our audiences. Your work acts as both an inspiration and a challenge to be more ambitious in our thinking.”

Peter Rowe/Artistic Director New Wolsey Theatre Ipswich