

Accessible Arts 'Access Busters' seminar

**Report by Kiersten Fishburn,
Accessible Arts, Audience
Development Officer.**

Accessible Arts ran a one-day seminar session looking at a range of arts and disability issues in Parramatta in September. As the name "Access Busters" implies this was a chance for people to come along and listen to a range of panellists and presenters talk about ways that they have 'busted through' access problems. Focusing on both the needs of artists and performers with disabilities, and people with disabilities as audience members, the day showcased some inclusive practises and discussed the issues in this field.

Topics ranged from ways to develop arts programs and workshops that are suitable for people with a variety of specific needs, to methods for establishing and servicing audiences of people with disabilities. Over the course of the day talk ranged from the legal obligations of arts companies, best practice projects, different models of teaching and learning and the need for their to be many different pathways for people with disabilities working in the arts.



Yvette Forster moved us all with a beautiful performance piece based around her experiences as a dance practitioner. Dora and Vicky, from the IPP crew, worked with Marc Carra to highlight some of the ways they develop their work. Neridah Wyatt-Spratt talked about exhibition design and standards for accessibility. Phew – a big day, full of exciting dialogue and ideas.

While the crowd at Access Busters wasn't as large as we would have liked (but then we'd love to be changing the whole world – right now!), everyone seemed to be really engaged with the issues and the feedback we got clearly indicated how people value the chance to learn more about access and disability and the arts. Many thanks to all our panellists and performers. Personally, it was wonderful to hear about your experiences and to be part of an environment in which we were sharing ideas.

Accessible Arts is always interested in looking at ways of engaging the arts and disability communities in discussions about inclusion, access and involvement in the arts. If you'd like to find out more about future seminars or have Accessible Arts organise a similar event for your organisation, let us know.

Above image; 'Blue Rocks' by
Yvette Forster & Richard Ruiz

Parramatta Riverside Theatres Access Busters' presentation **"Workshops in the Arts for People with Disabilities" (WAPD for short!), is a program administered by the Riverside Theatres, Parramatta.**

WAPD has been providing people with disabilities workshops in the arts for over seven years. We provide a safe, accessible and dynamic environment for participants, with the purpose of developing physical well being, self-esteem and confidence, self-awareness, self-discovery and self-expression. Through the arts, we are providing numerous small opportunities, from building skills of teamwork, concentration and toleration, to providing an environment for social interaction, creativity and fun. The extras that inevitably come out on top of this are a welcome and satisfying bonus.

Every week, for four terms a year, the participants are based at the Riverside Theatres, in the Raffertys Theatre, and just the venue is a big advantage to the program. The opportunity to work in a real theatre environment, to walk about back stage and see the staff at work is a new experience for the participants. Over the course of the year, we also use other areas in the Theatres, such as the Lennox Theatre and the main Riverside stage to hold rehearsals. The program culminates in an end-of-year performance in the Lennox Theatre, which is attended by family & friends, local schools, and last year the Parramatta Lord Mayor, who showed his support by coming along to present certificates to the participants.

Most of the participants we attract come from local organisations that work with people from group homes and respite care. Many of our participants are people who have limited interaction with people other than their carers and people from their homes, and our workshops open up a whole new network of relationships. Most importantly, new bonds are created, between participants, carers and our tutor Veronica Whelan.

The people who participate in WAPD are primarily people with intellectual disabilities, many of whom are also physically disabled, and most could not participate without their carers, who we encourage to join in the workshop. Some participants are partially/almost completely blind, deaf, some have limbs or need the use of a walking stick, some have very little control of their limbs, and need their carers to lift their arms for them, some cannot speak, some have behavioural problems, and anger management issues.

One of WAPD's greatest achievements, and to the credit of the tutor Veronica is the improvement we've seen in our participants. Slowly we have seen confidences build, relationships founded and capabilities expanded. We have seen participants begin the workshops, barely able to lift their arms to shoulder height, and now can move them freely. Earlier in the year, a new participant joined us who we'd been told didn't speak, and now he has built a trust with his fellow participants and is talking.

We encourage the same participants to come for all four terms in the year, as we tend to start off slowly and are working towards the end of year performance. This creates stability and trust, and assists us in following the progress of our participants.

'access busters'

Over the years the workshops have varied from the performing arts of drama & dance, to Visual Arts. Our highly successful Mural Painting workshop, which produced a fantastic artwork, was displayed in our theatre courtyard for our patrons to enjoy.

While we have ventured into different areas, such as Aerobics, Circus Skills and Martial Arts, it is our dance & movement workshops that have proven to be the most beneficial to our participants, and we have been concentrating solely on these for the past 2 years.

On the financial side of things, WAPD is funded by a community grant, participant fees and the Riverside Theatres. The grant is obtained through Parramatta City Council, by the Friends of the Riverside Theatres, an organisation who have been a constant and invaluable support to the program. Each year, the Friends also provide additional funds to provide costumes, and other necessities for our final concert. The grant and participant fees are used to cover the tutor fees, and some of the hire of the theatre. The remaining hire, final concert expenses, catering and other miscellaneous expenses are funded by the Riverside Theatres. No labour or administration costs are charged to the program. Previously we have also had numerous sponsors who have contributed funds and materials.

WAPD is a very popular and in-demand program. With very few similar programs in the area, a constant hurdle has been there is more interest in the program than places for attendance. After years of growing waiting lists, WAPD expanded in 2001 to allow us to shorten these lists and provide more participants access to the program.

riverside theatres

In previous years, although the aim was to have approximately 20 participants per class, we had closer to 30. With such a huge interest, we found it hard to turn anyone away. However, participants benefit more from a smaller class, where they have more feedback and one-on-one interaction with the tutor.

This issue was solved, in 2001 when it became possible to double the twice-weekly workshops, holding morning & afternoon sessions on both Tuesdays & Thursdays. With the capacity now at 80 in total, we have limited individual workshops to only 20 participants, therefore allowing the tutor to work with individuals more, and the benefits are greater.

While 2001 was a big year for WAPD in regards to expansion, we are continually working towards building on the successes on the program. Our main aim is to raise WAPD to a more formal level, increasing the potential for funding and community partnerships.

To take WAPD to the next level, we will inevitably have start with appointing a part-time coordinator for the program. While I can adequately coordinate the organisation of the program, as it is not my primary role at the theatres, unfortunately I haven't the opportunity to sit down and work on further expansion and take that next step. Two years ago, a proposed budget was drawn up to include a part-time coordinator, but unfortunately never eventuated. I hope that we can look into this again for 2003 and actually get it up and running.

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We have a waiting list of people, disability organisations and schools who are eager to join the program. We could easily fill up a third day of workshops, therefore expanding the program to take another third of it's current capacity. This has been discussed, and is a viable prospect for the near future.

An area I also hope WAPD could address in the future would be streamlining the workshops to suit ability, therefore catering to a larger part of the disabled community. While WAPD is open to all people with disabilities, not all would benefit from the current program, which has been devised around the current participants, most of whom have intellectual disabilities, and are very dependant on the help of their carers. Participants with more independence and a higher capability could become bored and therefore frustrated, as we have experienced, due to the need for more of a challenge. Earlier this year we had one participant in particular, who while really enjoyed the experience, was eager to be challenged more, and in a group with varying capabilities, it can be difficult to balance.

While we know what has to be done to build on the successes of our program, our main constraint is time. We need time to appoint a coordinator, who will have time to coordinate expansion and take the program to the next level. Hopefully this will see WAPD even more successful in the near future.

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