

Case Study 5

Improving the live theatre experience

Accessibility beyond the built environment.

Perth Theatre Trust in partnership with Subiaco Arts Centre, Barking Gecko Theatre Company and Senses Foundation.

Once you are inside the theatre, what happens in terms of participation? After the State Government's \$4.7million refurbishment of Subiaco Arts Centre in 2006, good inroads had been made at the venue in regard to the physical access of the building, but further work had to be done to make the artistic works more accessible for those with vision impairments.

Through the DAII Pilot Project, Perth Theatre Trust in partnership with Subiaco Arts Centre, Barking Gecko Theatre Company and Senses Foundation aimed to improve the live theatre experience for patrons with vision impairments.

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"Subiaco Arts Centre had been refurbished which included improved accessibility at the venue, for example all the signs for the toilets, rooms and lifts are in Braille, as well as the addition of a tactile sensor on floor surfaces and stairs," Deborah Mickle, Manager Contracts at the Perth Theatre Trust explains.

"So we've made some great improvements and received recognition for some of the things we've done in the built environment, but we needed to look at the performance side too."

Turning ideas into reality

While Perth Theatre Trust had some ideas about how to achieve this, the dilemma was how do you take those ideas and progress them? Along came the DAII Pilot Project.

"My role was project management, including talking to Barking Gecko and Subiaco Arts Centre about what was essentially just a concept – did we have a workable concept which would meet the criteria for project funding?" Ms Mickle says.

"So initially it was about creating an interest and connection and then taking this forward", she continues. "There had been some ideas at a venue level about audio description some time ago, so this was an obvious springboard into the DAII Project. It was beneficial that there had already been discussions and some ideas about accessibility and the arts in a broader sense than what we were delivering."

Perth Theatre Trust already had established relationships with Subiaco Arts Centre and Barking Gecko Theatre Company, but had not met with Senses Foundation until the partnering day organised by the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) and the Disability Services Commission (DSC) in April 2007.

Finding a partner

A requirement of the DAII Pilot Project was partnering with a disability services organisation to gain a better understanding of the needs of people with disabilities, and to start creating new and sustainable, across-sector relationships.

During the partnering day, there was a 'get to know each other' session.

"We were open to partnering with a number of organisations," Ms Mickle says. "And following a number of approaches to partner with organisations, and not really making much ground, we came to focus on Senses.

“The strength of the partnership can really make or break a project’s progression. The relationship and being on the same wave length as our contact person at Senses was wonderful.

"It sounds simplistic, but issues such as timing and locked-in production dates are crucial and therefore required us to match a partner to our production dates," explains Ms Mickle.



Photo courtesy of Perth Theatre Trust

The initial hitches in establishing a partnership stemmed from a lack of understanding about the project, what it entailed and what Perth Theatre Trust wanted to achieve.

Another vital success factor in forming a partnership was finding the right person to connect with in large organisations.

"I believe there's probably a person in every organisation who would go, 'great – when can we meet?' but finding that person can sometimes be the challenge. That was part of the reason why DCA did the introduction day which included 'meet and greet' sessions. It was fantastic because you got to talk to people directly and discuss ideas for collaboration. As we sat at tables and people talked about what they did, you could see the cogs turning; it was like electricity racing around the room," recalls Ms Mickle.

For Perth Theatre Trust, Barking Gecko were an ideal choice to partner with as the company resides in the Subiaco Arts Centre.

"We looked at their performance program to see what was suited to the DAll Pilot Project and the **The Troll from the Bowl** production was selected. The production was commencing at the beginning of our time schedule, so we needed to initiate many tasks in order to do the production as a DAll project with them."

The **Troll from the Bowl** continues the story of Three Billy Boats Gruff, from the perspective of the troll, Noel, who is chased into the river through the sewer and appears out of young Billy's loo.

“It was very graphic and funny and it was shown during the school holidays in July 2007,” Ms Mickle explains. “It had three actors that played six characters and it was very colourful and dynamic.

“Part of doing the touch tour and the introduction through the DAII Pilot Project for people with vision impairment was to feel the sense of aliveness of the costumes and to recognise via voice that there were actually all these different characters on stage.”

Training

A critical component of the partnership included the training of actors and everyone involved in the project to ensure readiness for conducting familiarisation tours at Subiaco Arts Centre, along with tactile tours of the production **The Troll from the Bowl**.

“We identified in the project plan that everyone involved in the project needed to be comfortable and relaxed and were aware about the needs of vision impaired people,” Ms Mickle explains.

“Training was conducted by the Senses Foundation using the physical layout of the theatre and production elements to improve our understanding of patron needs.”

Actors held tactile tours 45 minutes before the show started. The story of the production was explained and the DAII participants were given a short synopsis and the script beforehand.

“Actors explained the characters they played and their different voices and characteristics. There were props, like a really big toilet brush which was six foot

long, and the troll had exaggerated features which included a large tummy, hands and feet and a mass of dreadlocked hair with wonderful tactile qualities. The actors took the participants onto the stage and they were guided around the set and could feel what the toilet was like and how big it was, with the set layout explained to them,” Ms Mickle says.

“This orientation for patrons who were visually impaired worked really well and the participants absolutely loved it.”

There was a mixed group of participants, which included some mature adults and children who were visually impaired, and also parents with visually impaired children.

Being involved in the project has provided a lot of confidence for Perth Theatre Trust.



Photo courtesy of Perth Theatre Trust

“The project gave us the stepping stones to continue with access improvements for performances,” Ms Mickle says.

“I think the great thing about this initiative was the opportunity to experiment and the capacity to try something out and work it through and go, ‘that was a really good idea and these are the elements that really worked and these are the parts we would do differently if we had the opportunity to do it again’. It was a trial run.”

Future improvements

In terms of feedback from the participants, some points worth noting were that while they agreed touch tours made an enormous improvement to the theatre experience for patrons with vision impairment, to augment this improvement, audio description was recommended.

“As a result of this we have introduced audio description, so now this can be offered by the production companies. With the equipment now available, Perth Theatre Trust can facilitate the addition of audio description for a performance,” Ms Mickle says.

Perth Theatre Trust is keen to encourage more tactile tours, however, Ms Mickle acknowledges that it can be challenging due to production priorities.

“This is because you have the combination of actors needing to prepare for the performance and you have an audience coming into the theatre.

“Tactile tours and audio description are standard practice worldwide and nationally so there are opportunities for further learning.



Photo courtesy of Perth Theatre Trust

“We’re keen to do a second project to look at audio description and really build awareness amongst the theatre companies that it’s available and how they can get the most out of it, and encourage them to do a tactile tour along with it. The other side of that would also be looking at how to build our volunteer base, in order to make the service more readily available,” Ms Mickle concludes.

Outline of project

Perth Theatre Trust wanted to conduct a tactile theatre performance and a familiarisation tour at the Subiaco Arts Centre for people with low vision.

Partners

Perth Theatre Trust is responsible for the operation of a number of performing arts venues in Perth including His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Concert Hall, Playhouse Theatre and Subiaco Arts Centre.

Subiaco Arts Centre is a multi-purpose venue with three performance areas including a main auditorium, studio and outdoor amphitheatre.

Barking Gecko Theatre Company is Western Australia's professional theatre company performing for young people 5-17 years and their families. The company resides in the Subiaco Arts Centre.

Senses Foundation Inc is a charitable organisation providing disability support services to people of all ages in Western Australia. Senses Foundation's speciality is providing services to people who are deafblind.

Outcomes

Perth Theatre Trust created 'How to' flyers of the tours for their venues. They also conducted a comprehensive evaluation with project partners and patrons with low vision. Perth Theatre Trust also now offers audio transcription services in their venues as part of the hire agreement, which was a recommendation that transpired from the DAII Pilot Program.