

## Embracing Arts - Access Report for Chrimblesense

### Overview:

Throughout the Chrimblesense 2023 Christmas Tour, I was able to assess the effectiveness of our approach to access within our performances. This included how we both prepared audience members for our arrival and how it was received.

This report summarises some key aspects of our access as well as some ideas/ recommendations for the 2024 tour.

### What went well:

#### **Makaton**

The use of Makaton was really well received. Not only did it improve our 1:1 communication with audience members, we were able to advocate and increase its representation of its use within the venues we visited.

Multiple staff and family members commented that it had made a vast improvement to their child being able to access the show. Furthermore, during freeplay, it was incredibly common to spend time with family groups teaching them basic signs (e.g. their names and questions) as well as signs from the show.

A key example was a child who was deaf and learning makaton and basic BSL. Throughout the show, we were able to communicate key parts of the narrative and story directly to the child. The child was clearly excited to be able to understand what was happening in moments when text was used.

#### **Access Packs**

In a few schools, we noticed children arriving with printed copies of the social/ visual stories. Some staff members also shared that they had watched the introduction videos with their children. Some children were able to tell us our character names without introducing ourselves.

A few staff members shared that the access pack had increased their level of trust in the company as it was clear we understood our audiences by designating time/ effort to this preparation

#### **Cosy Corner**

The cosy corner was regularly used throughout the tour as well as the ear defenders. On many occasions, teachers/ staff/ family shared that

they were surprised that their young person benefitted from ear defenders when they have never used them before.

One hospice staff member from a new venue mentioned that they immediately trusted that we knew how to engage with their children because of both the access pack and use of the cosy corner.

### **Sensory led**

With an increased focus on sensory moments over text there was a noticeable increase in sustained engagement. The variety of sensory moments throughout the show meant there was a prop/ moment that would engage nearly every student.

Numerous staff/ family members shared that this was the most inclusive show they had seen. Many added that they had never seen a performance that was so tailored to their young person's needs.

The success of each sensory moment depended on our location and the needs of the group. For example, we found that those labelled ASD would be more inclined to engage in fast paced sensory moments like snowball fights, shake rattle and roll and the ribbons. In contrast, those with more complex needs tended to enjoy snow, torches and northern lights. The flexible nature of the show's structure meant the cast were able to identify the interest of the audiences and tailor the show to them (speeding up and slowing down on relevant sensory moments)

### **Chimes**

The chimes were a huge success. Their motif supported artists in refocusing the audience, signalling change and saving on vocal projection. A lot of teachers and hospice staff enquired where we'd bought them from so they could buy their own.

### **Freeplay**

This was a fantastic idea to allow children autonomy to choose what they enjoyed engaging with, and allowed a soft exit too.

We could do with the Christmas tree either having a small step to reach or it going on a lower box (sometimes children couldn't reach)

### **Access Issues we came across:**

#### **Show being performed in the round**

As previously mentioned, the show being in the round in school/ hospice settings meant it was quite difficult to hold the audience's attention and maintain the feeling of a show. Often, teachers/ TAs

seemed to give us more support with crowd management if we were end on. I think the round would be great in theatre venues but maybe a technical step too far in schools.

Perhaps the round could work if the middle space was larger with the boxes further away from each other and the speaker/ ipad not in the middle.

### **Audience size**

Audience sizes above 30 became very difficult to manage. My main thought is that with larger audiences, some young people/ children are overstimulated by the increase in sound/ meeting/ engaging with other students they normally wouldn't.

Additionally, handing props out at speed with large audiences vs length of time available in songs meant we would struggle to fully realise the sensory moment. Whilst we would hand them out/use staff etc, with large audiences we couldn't make it back to demonstrate/ support staff in how to best engage the young people. As a result, at times a TA would maybe hold the torch for a moment and then let go. We often found that the children who needed that longer 1:1 engagement were then missing out on some of the experiences.

With larger audience sizes, we would then also see the effect of understaffing in schools. Which meant often, a teacher may be trying to support 3 -4 children in a brand new setting for their child. This seemed to sometimes lead to children being overstimulated etc

### **Toy Section**

The toy section was our most flexible section. Depending on the audience, we might remove the building of the toys and focus on purely wrapping and ribbons. I feel that the Toy Section was sometimes our hardest section to maintain engagement with as it broke the expected structure we had set up on previous sensory moments eg. Frosty's line, music begins, sensory engagement alongside melodic music. I wonder if the change to the rhythmic music here was creating a slightly different atmosphere, or if there was too much stimulus with the different props. Equally, the toys were brilliant and children loved them, and they really loved the ribbons! There were moments with smaller audiences in hospices where we would take a lot of time on each section. Everyone got a toy in their family unit, everyone then wrapped it with paper, and then covered it in a ribbon.

I haven't necessarily got an answer for this bit, but maybe in rehearsals we could revisit? Perhaps Joy's section is a Christmas dance party with

ribbons, and opening the gifts? Or it stays in a similar way but with a melodic track to support?

### Additional thoughts

#### **Music soundtrack in advance of show**

Jill Briggs has an excellent article about the use of repetition with audiences. With this in mind, could we pre-record songs to send with the resource pack - a "Chrimblesense Album". During our visits to schools, there was lots of Christmas music played on youtube for students. I wondered if having our songs in advance could be a fun and useful addition to preparing our audiences.

#### **Smaller Audience Sizes**

I always feel that smaller audiences work better. In school settings it would be ideal to be doing one show per class. I know this can be an issue with funding and ensuring we reach as many students as possible within a school. So maybe 10 children per actor is best, I feel that with this number we can really engage the children to the maximum.

#### **Can we start to introduce a small narrative to support our audience in developing connection/ empathy?**

With the basic structure in place, and sensory moments settled, I wonder if we can begin to introduce a small narrative. The aim behind the narrative is to support children in their potential development of understanding emotions/ empathy. For example, is there a moment that Frosty can't work out what Joy is feeling and needs help from our audience. For example, Joy feels sad because she broke a toy. How can we make her feel better? We can make her better with a bit of Warmth etc. I also feel it can be exciting to explore emotions/ narrative in sensory and inclusive ways. How do we change music to support an emotional atmosphere or plot point etc.

#### **Introducing elements of live music**

The chimes had a sensational effect. I wonder if there are other ways of bringing live instruments into the performance, for example, during the Northern Light? Or Warmth?

### Conclusion

The show was a huge success, and many families, teachers and staff shared that it was the most inclusive performance they had seen by a company. Others added that it was clear Christmas4Kids had the knowledge and understanding of what it means to create work for audiences with a variety of access needs.

One hospice staff member said "The children loved this far more than meeting Olaf and Elsa!"