

2024 Diversity Monitoring

The South Devon players Theatre & Film Company.

Introduction

Our theatre company was originally founded in order to provide professional opportunities to people who due to location, ethnic appearance (or any other reasons, like not being able to move from the area due to family or other responsibilities) were denied the opportunity to pursue a career in theatre. A lack of diverse opportunity, negative perceptions around people of colour, neurodiversity, age differences etc, and the amount of gatekeeping of theatre traditionally, is what prompted us to come into being.

We are based in the fishing port of Brixham, on the South Devon coast, though our actors and crew come from across Devon, and from time to time, further afield.

Regional demographics:

Brixham, in the regional area of Torbay, as a parish has a population of 17,000 (2019 population figures), and Torbay as a whole, a population of 134,000. Around one-in-four of Torbay's population are aged 65 years and over (35,600 people in Torbay, or 26.5% are aged 65 years and over compared to 18.1% across England).

Torbay has a resident ethnic minority population (excluding white ethnic groups) of 3,260 (2.5%). Of these, 1,420 residents (1.1%) are Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, 1,353 (1%) Asian/Asian British, 251 (0.2%) Black British, and 236 (0.2%) Other ethnic Groups.

Torbay is the most deprived local authority area in the South West region. Within Torbay around one-in-three of the population live in areas in the top 20% most deprived in England, People in more deprived communities tend to experience multiple long-term conditions, lower life aspirations, and generally have poorer health outcomes, such as shorter life expectancy. Poverty can also lead to negative stereotyping when seeking education, training or employment. Brixham ranks as among the most deprived areas within Torbay.

Politically, Torbay is largely traditionally Conservative.

Devon, of which Torbay forms a part, as a region is a largely rural area, with the cities of Plymouth and Exeter at the respective Western and Eastern sides of the county (reached via public transport in around two hours each, from Torbay).

Anecdotally, all but of one of our team members over the years, who is either of an ethnic minority, or who has been incorrectly perceived as such, has received racially motivated verbal aggression, in the region.

Our Policies

We maintain a strict Equal Opportunities policy for all who wish to become involved in theatre either as a participant (actor or crew member) or as an audience member. This policy is available to read on the policies section of our website. We keep our practices, both in terms of equal opportunities and other professional requirements, inline with national, and international best practice, under constant review for improvement.

A typical show

Our shows are based on either historical events (local, national or European) as researched new texts (making opportunities for new writers), Shakespeare (in which case we are performing the original text), or stage adaptations of classical literature. These themes are aimed to attract audiences of the major age demographics of Torbay (65 and older), who also comprise the majority of regular theatre-goers in the region, who anecdotally prefer shows where they know what to expect in terms of content (without audiences we would be unable to put on shows, and continue

our work). Exploring historical events and classical literature, also allow for educational experiences for all ages, increasing interest in historical events and how society has developed over the centuries, and in making literature more accessible ; “I enjoyed the play, I want to read the book again, now that I understand what it is about”.

Many of these shows would be viewed traditionally as requiring a “white cast, with a majority of male roles”. However, we habitually push the boundaries, with gender-blind castings for almost all roles especially in our Shakespeare productions, allowing men and women to be auditioned equally, and often resulting in female-heavy shows. Additionally unless specifically unavoidable, we do not specify the ethnicity of a character, thus ensuring that we are keeping the door open for all ethnicities who wish to audition. The resulting shows receive excellent feedback, in no way dulled by our non-traditional castings.

In some specific cases, a role may need to be cast with particular attention to the ethnicity, nationality, age, gender or other characteristic, for the purposes of an authentic and realistic performance. This is clearly communicated in audition information.

Selection of actors is based solely on talent and ability to play the specific role. Crew are selected on their interest and talent in developing skills specific to that aspect of theatre production.

We open all our auditions to “all comers” and do not require a basic level of experience; thus we allow everyone who may wish to enter the performing arts, an equal point of access, and opportunity to participate.

With regard to stage crew, there is no limitation on gender or any other characteristic. With a mostly female stage crew currently, we look forward to expanding the team for many shows post-pandemic, and welcoming all who wish to apply.

Audience data

As previously stated, traditional theatre audiences in our home area of Torbay, are largely those aged over 65, who have previous experience of attending theatre events. The expectation is to attend a traditional theatre; we have found on repeated occasions that less-traditional venues like church halls, parks, etc are markedly less popular. Our company has measured show events where performances of the same show in a church hall attract an audience of 2, but a performance in a traditional theatre will attract a full house in middle-triple-figures with queues down the street. Therefore in Torbay, we tend to aim for more traditional venues like theatres, (also though branching to museums and stately homes).

As soon as we perform outside the region, we find our shows in non-traditional venues attended as well as the traditional theatres, with our shows going up in churches, community halls, disused railway tunnels as well as theatres. These audiences tend to be younger demographics of working age adults and older children.

While we obviously have to go where we can attract audiences, we also make a lot of effort in terms of outreach to new audiences, in the following manners.

Show information is posted widely online, and sent to schools, and other organisations where there may be a significant area of specialist interest.

Any details of castings/ shows which may have a specific interest to people of a specific protected characteristic, religion, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, etc, are sent specifically to organisations where those people are likely to be.

Free online education packs are being made available from 2021 onwards for each production, to increase engagement through peripheral free learning resources for children and students.

Door to door leaflet drops are made in our home areas to reach as many people as possible including those who may not be online, or reading posters in town.

We have attempted to make free show tickets available through foodbanks, to reach those who could not afford to go to the theatre, but these were not historically then passed out to people; however, we will be attempting again, post-pandemic.

We usually price our shows at £10 or less per ticket, to allow for as much affordability as possible, while also recognising that we have actors and technical crew who are largely from high-poverty backgrounds who are self-employed creatives and also need to be paid (for which we are reliant on sales, as most of our shows are profitshares, where each person involved in creating the show receives an equal percentage of 100% of the money from ticket sales, divided equally).

The company is led, and was founded, by an autistic mixed-race woman who has lived in, and close to Torbay, all her life.

When casting and crewing, we do not ask for any information regarding religion, sexuality, gender identity, income background, disability etc, and we allow cast and crew to self-identify what they feel is relevant.

While the specific numbers of a show cast and crew may vary, usually between ten and fifteen people, and the demographics within, we can say with certainty that almost all of our productions are female led, with a largely or completely female technical crew.

There are usually three or four team-members with various disabilities, and around half to two thirds of the team are neurodivergent (ag Autism, ADHD, etc) and for whom all reasonable adjustments are made. In the past we have had actors & crew who require wheelchairs, assistance dogs, etc, all of whom we have been able to work with safely as full respected team members.

There are usually a number of team members who fit into the LGBT++ bracket. It is not something we ask people about, since it is not relevant to the performance work or technical work, and we know only what is disclosed in conversation.

Around half, or less, of our team members have usually been to University, and usually one or two struggle with basic literacy, for which we do our best to provide extra support.

There are usually two or three team members who struggle with extreme anxiety, and again where possible, this is positively supported by the rest of the company members.

A majority of team members are on low incomes, as varyingly evidenced by claiming benefits, working in low-paid “day jobs”, and necessarily living with parents or in shared accommodation as adults in their twenties – forties unable to afford their own rented or bought accommodation. Very few own their own cars and most rely on public transport.

The fact that often, Laura, the company founder, and regular show director, of mixed racial heritage, is often the only “ethnically diverse” person involved with the company, is a point of company concern, however we also recognise that we are in an area where there is very little ethnic diversity, and that our actual show participants, are a reflection of regional demographics. In fact, even when we have only one person of diverse background in a project that already puts our percentage higher than local population demographics.

How we support alternative needs

(Cast and Crew)

After someone joins our team, we make it generally clear to everyone, that anyone with additional or different needs may approach senior team members to discuss any required accommodations. These may include (but are not limited to) conversations about physical accessibility, assistance with cognitive requirements, noting allergies/ dietary requirements for provided refreshments, making space/ time for prayers, providing versions of documents in large print, etc.

The standpoint taken is that the person will explain to us what they need, and all information divulged is voluntary, and treated confidentially. We encourage any team member who feels their needs may have been missed or not understood, to remind us calmly; we are all learning, and sometimes a crew member may have a condition or disability themselves, where they may need a reminder. Nothing being missed is intentional.

The company cannot act upon information not provided.

The company will respond in the conversation, with all accommodations that can be achieved being noted by the director and stage manager. Sometimes it will be something that cannot be done (for example a Victorian-era venue hired for one day for a show, may not be able to have major changes made to ramps or doorway widths), but this will always be explained upfront. The aim is to make our work as accessible as possible, and the desire is to include. If something cannot be assisted with, the reasons will be openly given.

(Audience)

Clear production details for each performance are provided on the box office page of our website. This includes, but is not limited to, details of building access including specialist access for those with mobility needs, any access to hearing loops or sign language, warnings of loud sounds or lights which may affect cognitive conditions or seizures, details of local public transport facilities and car parks, availability of toilets and refreshments etc.

This is information habitually collected by our company crew when visiting a venue prior to booking it for performances. The company are currently exploring the possibility to create “social stories” documents to assist prospective audience members with severer forms of autism, in knowing what to expect when they come to see a show.

The company are currently exploring creating online streams of shows, to provide ticketed access to those who cannot visit a theatre/ alternative performance venue in person.

Printed programmes may be requested in advance of performances in larger print. (notice is required in order to print the documents)

Audience data collection

As a touring theatre company which will often arrive at a venue, setup in the middle of the day, perform in the evening, then pack-down and depart the same night, with shows usually ticketed by the external venue, and without our own staff available (due to numbers and time constraints) to run audience surveys; we are unable to collect a lot of audience demographics, and again all of our information is anecdotal, from visual observation. Due to GDPR, we do not request audience information from externally managed venues.