Breaking Down the Barriers to Broadway

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Last week we attended a talk on How To Make Broadway More Accessible, hosted by The Broadway League and the producers of Spring Awakening. It featured a great line-up of representatives from groups working with disability, particularly with disability and the performing arts: TDF (Theatre Development Fund), the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Autism Speaks, Deaf West Theatre, Art Beyond Sight, The Broadway League and the Special Olympics.

The conversation was enlightening, and clearly only a small (but significant) step in what must be a long-term process and a change of culture. We at Tinc are beginning to examine the steps that we, as production managers, can take toward making theatre more accessible to all potential audience members (and theatre makers).

Here's a brief wrap-up of what we learned last week about steps that theaters and productions are taking to making their shows available to people with sensory, social and learning disabilities, beginning long before the audience arrives at the theater.

If you have accessible performances - Be Find-able!

Nearly 1 in 5 people in the U.S. has a disability. People with disabilities are constantly looking for shows they can go to, so it's important to make sure you can be found! TDF and The Broadway League will soon be launching a new site which will serve as a one-stop website for accessible Broadway performances for theatergoers with disabilities. Once you have accessibility options, you need to get word out about them!

Make Your Website Accessible

There are a number of steps you can take to make your website comprehensible for people with disabilities, making it possible for more people to perceive, understand, navigate and interact with the site. Providing the option of adjustable text size and text alternatives for non-text content, such as short captions for every image can be good steps. Provide text transcripts for any audio or video content, and make sure all functionality on your website is available from a keyboard, as many people rely on the keyboard to interact with the web;. This also helps people who use voice recognition to operate your website. There are many many more steps to web accessibility. Make sure to check out the Web Accessibility Initiative for more guidelines and resources.

Provide Information About the Theatre

When people are looking to buy tickets, make sure to provide details that may make their time at the theatre easier. This goes beyond simply knowing that there is wheelchair seating and assistive listening devices available. Some of the other questions you can answer are… How accessible is the theater? Is there an elevator or an escalator? How many bathrooms are there and how wide are the doors? Where is the parking lot and how far from the entrance is it? How many entrances are there, where are they located and how wide are the doors? Is the Box Office counter wheelchair accessible?

Some theatres are going into even more depth by providing walkthroughs of the process of theater going so people and their caregivers can know exactly what to expect. Here is a sample "social narrative":

When I arrive, the doors will most likely be closed. I may have to stand in line and wait for the lobby to open, at which point someone will be there to direct me towards the ticket taker. The theater uses a scan system to take tickets so I will get your entire stub back. They will point out where the bathrooms and refreshments are. We may take beverages into the theatre with us. The ushers will direct you to the door closest to your seat. At the door, an usher will ask to see my ticket so they can see which seat I have. They will then give me a program, return my ticket, and will walk me to my seat.

Provide Information About the Show

TDF is one of the groups leading the movement to making theatre accessible to individuals with autism. For theatergoers with cognitive disabilities, the experience of seeing a show can be enhanced by having some context ahead of time. A simple step is making the Playbill available ahead of time, digitally. Other helpful resources the show can provide are a character guide, recordings of the music, pictures of the various settings, and a synopsis of the show.

One of the speakers on the panel spoke about how much getting a behind-the-scenes tour can affect the theatergoer's experience, giving them the chance to understand how things were arranged onstage.

These are just a few of our initial take-aways on what steps we, the theatre community can take to make theatre accessible. We have a ways to go, and the first steps challenge preconceived notions about behavior, culture and thinking. It may simply be a problem of awareness or fear of what we don't know or understand. We are eager to continue this conversation and take the time to learn about what we can do.

What are you doing to help make theatre more accessible?

Did we miss anything? We're eager to continue the conversation; Leave us a comment or tweet @tincprod.

Resources:

TDF Autism Theatre Initiative: Planning Guide for Theatres
https://www.tdf.org/emailimages/TAP/ATI/ATIPlanningGuide.pdf

The Kennedy Center: Sensory Friendly Programming for People with Social & Cognitive Disabilities, A guide for Performing Arts Settings
https://www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility/education/lead/SensoryGuidebook.pdf

Theatre Access NYC - new website being launched this month by The Broadway League & TDF
http://theatreaccess.nyc/

The Web Accessibility Initiative
https://www.w3.org/WAI/

NYC's Disability Etiquette Guide
http://www.nyc.gov/html/mopd/downloads/pdf/etiquette_form.pdf