

Unscene Suffolk: *A Zimmer of Hope* Evaluation report

Background

Unscene Suffolk is a community theatre company of adults with visual impairment, founded in 2013. *A Zimmer of Hope*, produced in 2016, was the company's fourth production. The project was funded by Arts Council England and Suffolk Community Foundation, with significant support-in-kind from the New Wolsey Theatre and Sensing Change. We also partnered with Suffolk Age UK to promote the performances and raise awareness of their campaign *There's More to Me*.



Figure 1 A scene from *A Zimmer of Hope*, Fran as Gertie with Freddie the Goldfish

Project content and implementation

Project concept

The starting points for the project are explained in Appendix 1: Programme notes. *A Zimmer of Hope* marked a departure from previous Unscene Suffolk projects, being the first time we had created a piece that was deliberately non-linear, and placing a strong emphasis on having group members heavily involved in writing the final script. It was a piece very much inspired by the individuals in the group, many of whom we know well having worked together for the past three years. The show aimed to celebrate the contribution of the many older people in the group, and was intentionally not about blindness, in response to members' concerns that we should not become pigeonholed into this single theme for our performances.

Participants

14 visually impaired participants took part in *A Zimmer of Hope*. During the project two other participants attended the group but did not become regular members or take part in the performance. Around half of the group were aged 55 and over. Although many group members were forced to miss some workshops for personal reasons, most attended regularly from January to July.

Staffing and Volunteers

All workshops were led by facilitator and project leader Jenni Halton. After an unforeseen staffing issue a new Assistant Facilitator, Caroline Roberts, was recruited and joined the project in March. Three volunteers supported the workshops and performances. Sensing Change trained both Caroline and our Stage Manager Kate Warner in Community Sighted Guiding at no cost to Unscene Suffolk.

Volunteers' duties included meeting participants at bus stops and train stations, assisting with mobility and refreshments in the space, and other visual tasks such as describing visual elements of the work being shared. Where appropriate during the workshops, volunteers were encouraged to join in with creative exercises. During the performances, volunteers had specific responsibility for assisting participants backstage, helping with costume changes, and assisting visually impaired audience members. In this project more so than previous ones, volunteers also assisted with the many scene changes which arose as a result of the episodic style of production.

Phase 1: Ideas Development

Initial ideas for the production were explored during workshops during the winter of 2015-16. Workshop content included:

- Shared reading of poetry about ageing e.g. *The Seven Ages of Man* and *When I Grow Old* – using these to develop scenes and songs.
- Devising spoof adverts for products aimed at older people, creating game show formats and spoofing other types of popular media content.
- Sharing of personal experiences and expectations of ageing, both positive and negative.
- A visit from Audio Descriptor Louise Fryer who co-led a workshop on the topic of Audio Description and political correctness.

Following these initial workshops, Jenni worked with group members Julie Bennett (an ex-drama teacher with experience of mounting community performances) and Clare Burman, both of whom were keen to be involved in writing the script. Various ideas for an overall structure were discussed, with Julie suggesting the idea of setting the play in an old people's home, with most of the scenes being things that play out on the TV when nobody is watching. This format allowed for a non-linear structure with no 'main' parts and the possibility for individual group members to script whole scenes.



Figure 2 Mark, Carolyn, Clare and Dave performing the Zimmer Zumba

The three main writers worked together to create a storyboard of scenes which were presented to the group, and over the course of around 6 workshops these scenes were improvised by the actors in order to develop the characters and generate content for the script. These sessions were audio-recorded, allowing Jenni, Clare and Julie to lift lines directly from the improvisations during the process of scriptwriting. In addition, another group member, Wayne, contributed a scene he had written independently which was also included in the script, along with a song compiled from two members' own versions of a well known tune, adapted to the theme of ageing.

The final script was presented to the cast in mid-March, and distributed in a range of accessible formats for all cast members to begin learning their lines.

Phase 2: Rehearsal and performance

Creative team

Jenni Halton led all workshops and directed the final performance, with Caroline Roberts assisting from mid-March. A wider creative team, recruited prior to the commencement of Phase 2, was engaged to work on the performance in the following capacities:

Amy Mallett – Musical Director and Composer

Kate Warner – Production Assistant (encompassing stage management)

Danuta Tarbard – Costume Supervisor

Scripts and line-learning

In the past learning lines has proved extremely challenging for some members of the group, however in this project the spread of lines among the

different cast members was far more balanced and this was reflected in the ease with which people got to grips with the script.

Various methods were employed from large print scripts to screen-reader friendly email versions and CD recordings. The writers' knowledge of the cast enabled them to structure the script appropriately for individuals; for example casting an actor with a learning disability in roles where he could be closely supported by others.

Style and aesthetics

A Zimmer of Hope was the first time Unscene Suffolk had worked in a conventional theatre setup as opposed to being immersive or site-specific. This was a conscious decision in response to some group members – particularly some of the older actors - saying that they wanted more time off stage, to relax between scenes. This decision turned out to be one of the biggest challenges of the entire project, as explained in the next section.

We were also concerned that the show should remain highly accessible and innovative despite its conventional appearance. We decided to offer a touch tour for the first time, which our members enjoyed taking part in, and we also delivered audio description with a twist.

Our previous three productions had included audio description integrated into the script, something that was enjoyed by audiences but contributed hugely to the challenge of line-learning and proved particularly difficult for a group of actors who cannot see what they are describing! This time around we decided to try something new, and approached local VocalEyes describer Louise Fryer, whom we knew had a reflective interest in AD as the author of a new book on the subject. Louise agreed to describe the show for us, but also to be written into a comedic scene in which a pompous game show presenter confronts the audio-describer and demands to know how she has been described. By doing this we intended to draw attention to the AD (despite it not being audible to people without headsets for most of the show), and to highlight the complexities of access vs political correctness in a light-hearted way. This was very much in line with the light, fun feeling of the show overall, which attracted many positive comments from audiences.

Performances

Three performances of *A Zimmer of Hope* took place on 15 and 16 July 2016. A total of 160 tickets were sold, slightly below our target of 200 but still representing our most-watched show to date.

By far the biggest challenge of the production week arose from the decision to use a conventional theatre setup, as we discovered on transferring our tightly rehearsed show from the rehearsal room to the venue. Whilst the on-stage movement had been highly choreographed in a marked-up rehearsal space, it was evident that we also needed to choreograph everything that happened backstage during the performance. Not only did we need to fit 20 people into a small space with props and costumes, 14 of those people had a visual impairment, and many of them found that their residual vision was completely eliminated by being in the dark. Happily, after installing some tactile and high-

contrast markers backstage, and thanks to the calm and dedicated work of our backstage team, everything ran smoothly for the performances.

Audience members were asked to fill in feedback forms, which were extremely positive. Comments included:

“Loved the use of audio description and the fact that it was acknowledged . Zimmer Zumba was absolutely hilarious - inspired! Loved how joyous the performance was. Great use of music. It was clear how much the work originated from the cast - really authentic and full of heart.”

“Good format of sketches allowed for anticipation in the audience. A vital opportunity for all, whatever physical ability, to create and participate and be visual as part of the local community. Also to explode easy assumptions too often made about older people too in the generalised and stereotyped way often used.”

“Very enjoyable and the actors looked very happy too. They all acted so well. I forgot some of them couldn't see and thought the scripts were funny, topical and clever. Well done everyone!”



Figure 3 Vince, Wayne, Pam, Kim and Caroline in WC Tours commercial

“I loved the enthusiasm and joy that the entire cast showed as they performed their various roles. The songs were brilliantly written - very clever and sung beautifully. I really liked the fact that the audio describer came out as part of the show (we didn't have headsets). I felt the show was cleverly informative as well as being very funny and enjoyable. Thank you!”

The performance also received a review in the Ipswich Star, from which the following is extracted:

“[The scenes] were very funny and had the audience laughing throughout, including news and weather reports, adverts for Zimmer Zumba and WC Tours, an episode of East Coasters, a game show and finally a talent show where three of the residents appeared singing and dancing about the joys of ageing.

The audio describer becoming a character in her own right was a nice touch and gave us a wonderful insight into how audio description works and how it benefits the non-sighted audience members. It was different to their previous productions as it was more sketch-based and there was certainly a nod to Carry On films, having us laugh at the thought of growing old ungracefully.”

Audience data was also collected and revealed the following:

- 12.5% of those who answered the survey were under 25, up from 10% for our previous production which had been marketed more obviously as a ‘family show’, and despite this production being a more ‘difficult sell’ for the younger generation. 20% were aged 26-40, 37.5% 41-60, and 27.5% over 60.
- 10% of those who answered the survey considered themselves to be blind or partially sighted.
- 22.5% of those who answered the survey said they go to the theatre less than once a year, or ‘never’.

Evaluation

Participant feedback was collected via evaluation workshops, and group members also sent in comments by email following the performances. A couple of themes were prevalent among these comments.

1. Artistic ownership

Individuals recognised that ideas they had generated in workshops formed an important part of the final script. People remembered that they had named the various places, characters and products in the show such as Zimmer Zumba, WC Tours, etc. Specific comments included:

“I loved all the singing and the way the songs came together with everybody writing them. And we sung it like we really loved singing!”

“for me personally it was a really nice feeling to see the trailer that I had written being fully produced in film format. It was surreal but brilliant. I said ‘wow, how cool does that look!’” – Clare Burman, writer

“even though what I wrote was only a few minutes long I liked having my own scene in the show. It was good to finally do that after a few years of thinking about it.” – Wayne Witney, writer

“I liked being part of the audience touch tour because we usually experience that as audience members when we go to the theatre, and I’m glad we were able to offer it to our own audience.”

“For the first time I sat in the audience without a script! I knew that it was your [the cast’s] show, and no matter what happened you would nail it.” – Jenni Halton, director

2. Fun

The other theme which shone through in our evaluation session was the enormous amount of *fun* the participants had experienced.

“because the show was lots of little sketches it was easier to remember your lines. The cues were easier and with fewer people on stage at a time it was easier to banter, more fun and less pressure.”

“I enjoyed all of it and I love the way it always seems to come together in the end. There are points when you think [pulls face] but it does always come together!”

“I loved it all, every bit of it. Because it was fun!” – participant aged 75

“I loved the spirit of the whole thing. I was really proud of us all. We were overcoming huge obstacles to make the world see that life can be fun despite huge challenges, and that life is great, and go for it! We'd got a real message, and it was a message to me that I thoroughly enjoyed and took to heart.” – participant aged 76



Figure 4 the cast in the finale

3. Other benefits

A number of people talked about how involvement in the workshops impacts on their life outside of the drama group:

“over the few years we’ve done this, everybody has gained more confidence. I thoroughly enjoy it. I say to people ‘I go to drama’ and they are always interested.”

“drama gives people confidence anyway, but also because we all have the same disability, there’s understanding and empathy. You all know what it’s like. I never wanted to be a member of a ‘blind group’ but it really has given me a lot more confidence. I think more so than the drama itself, just being part of the group.”

“if I find I’m suddenly asked a difficult question and don’t immediately know the answer, the drama suddenly comes out. I think that’s your [Unscene Suffolk’s] training because in the workshops you’re apt to spring in us something difficult like pretending to be Humpty Dumpty or whatever. Rubbish comes out but it comes out in a focused sort of way! Somehow you can bring out some answer that’s reasonably comprehensible. Strong and wrong!”

*“I get quite down about my visual impairment, quite depressed, and this drama group gives me a reason not to be. It’s one of the highlights of my week, it keeps me going and stops becoming a complete and utter grumpy old *** !!”*

Areas for improvement

The main area for improvement that was identified during evaluation was the need to measure out backstage as well as stage areas in rehearsal, as detailed earlier in this report. One group member articulated the importance of this below:

“some of us have residual vision which is useful in one setting - like a rehearsal space with high contrast - but not in another like a black box theatre. It may be worth getting somebody with this kind of level of vision in to spend some time in the venue and make suggestions before the full cast arrives. “

Another possible area where targets were not completely met was around the development of formal acting skills, which had been one of the original aims of the project in response to requests from the group to learn about different acting methodologies. Although this request was fulfilled through two workshops led by visiting practitioner Joe Leat, who introduced the group to theories from the Stanislavskian tradition, this felt largely ‘separate’ from the evolving production which, due to its comedic and sketch-based nature (with most actors playing multiple characters each for a short period of time), was not the easiest of projects to apply these methodologies to in depth. Despite this, the workshops provided a welcome insight into a different way of working and we do hope to continue inviting practitioners in to teach the group about a range of performance methodologies having made this small start.

Finally, our attempt to explore alternatives to continuous integrated Audio Description was the subject of much reflection. Most importantly, everyone agreed that far more of the describer’s time would be required in order to engage in a full exploratory process – something our budget simply did not allow. The group enjoyed Louise’s workshop and appreciated the opportunity

to discuss elements of the audio description with her, but schedules did not allow these conversations to be very detailed. We also encountered unforeseen challenges with the closing scenes – after Louise had been introduced to the audience – in which she delivered the remaining AD over a microphone to the whole audience. Having worked with integrated AD before, the writers drafted this into the script so that the performers would know where to pause for description, and roughly what would be said. By doing this we aimed to take advantage of the AD *not* being a ‘bolt on’ as in a normal theatre show where it has to be squeezed between the lines of dialogue. Unfortunately this method failed to acknowledge Louise’s needs as a describer; she needed to watch what was happening and respond to it, meaning that the scene needed to be complete and perform-able *without* AD, even if the integrated descriptions might later become – loosely - a part of it. On the one hand this was the only way to guarantee genuine spontaneity which would allow Louise to respond to the unexpected and create a truly accessible performance; on the other, some group members expressed frustration that it meant inevitable moments where the description happened over the top dialogue – something they found difficult as both actors and audience

Figure 5 Audio Describer Louise Fryer



members. A further problem with fully scripted descriptions was that actors would wait for an action to be described before performing it, whereas the describer was expecting to take her cue *from* the action. The group therefore agreed to adapt to a new approach in which they were required to ignore the descriptions and carry on with the scene regardless. For many this was not easy but in the end, the actors rose to the challenge extremely well and the exploration that we had managed felt worthwhile if not comprehensive. One group member summed up the situation well, saying that we should have decided earlier on whether Louise was, in those closing scenes, a describer, or a character – the latter would perhaps make things more straightforward, but at what cost to

access considerations? It gave us a lot to ponder and we will continue doing so when Jenni, Clare and Julie attend the upcoming Audio Description: Art of Access conference in London this autumn. We will no doubt continue exploring audio description in all its forms throughout our work.

Phase 3: Reflection and legacy

A handful of further workshops took place in autumn 2016 during which participants were given a chance to reflect on the performance, and offer ideas for future work which will build on the skills and ideas developed during the project. Some of the above data was collected during this final phase, as well as initial ideas for further work, which we hope to begin in early 2017.

Jenni Halton
Workshop Leader, Unscene Suffolk
December 2016

Appendices:

1. Programme notes

Unscene Suffolk presents *A Zimmer of Hope*
Programme notes

The inspiration for this show came from observing the Unscene Suffolk group over the last three years, and noticing the many friendships in the group that traverse the boundaries of age. In a world where the differences between young and old are so often emphasised, it has been wonderful to see people from across the generations positively embracing each other's input and we wanted to celebrate this.

Our working process has been more inclusive than ever, with many of the scenes in the final script having been written by members of the acting company, and the cast have also been involved in creating audio and video trailers. For those who've seen our previous work you may notice a different 'feel' to this piece, reflecting the way in which it was made. We set out to explore the theme of growing old, and I was keen to examine and destroy some stereotypes. Sometimes this happened naturally, but sometimes the group's reaction was to acknowledge the layer of truth in the stereotype – while never being scared to poke fun at it, of course.

We are delighted to have partnered with Suffolk Age UK whose current campaign "There's More to Me" fits in so well with our theme this year. While *A Zimmer of Hope* is a playful piece of theatre, we hope the serious message about the contribution that older people can make in all spheres of life, will be demonstrated on stage by their invaluable input into this project.

We have also worked with a professional Audio Describer for the first time and would like to thank Louise Fryer being so open to exploring with us a new approach to audio description. The project will provide a Case Study for Louise's ongoing research and writing on the topic of audio description, through which we hope to generate further interest in our work.

Jenni Halton, Director and Project Leader, Unscene Suffolk

Cast

Major Howardson / Zumba man / Body
Peggy Jones / Dolly / Miss Tinkle
Scarlett Wilde / Aunt Em
Gertie Fumble / Mother
Tea lady / Paris / Zoe / Felicity
Clark Spent / Bus driver / Vicar
Fiona Spruce / Zumba lady / Body
Wendy
Zumba man / Steve
Maureen / Sam / Phyllis
Mary / Zumba lady / Pippa
TV executive / Jimmy Riddle / Fester
Mrs Leek / Nicola S Parsons
Francis / Caretaker

David Appleton
Pam Rivers
Denise Tillier
Fran Ling
Clare Burman
Vince Ridgewell
Julie Bennett
Caroline Giddings
Mark Conquer
Maggie Davy
Carolyn Allum
Wayne Witney
Kim Clifton
Mark Curtis

Written by Jenni Halton, Clare Burman, Julie Bennet and Wayne Witney, with contributions from the whole cast.

Director	Jenni Halton
Musical Director and Sound Recordings	Amy Mallett
Workshop Assistant	Caroline Roberts
Production Assistant / Stage Manager	Kate Warner
Costume Supervisor	Danuta Tarbard
Audio Describer	Louise Fryer
Volunteers	Anne Altria, Pat Abbot, Gill Cook, Pauline Payne

Unscene Suffolk Trustees: Juliette Aylett, Clare Burman, Carolyn Allum, Julie Bennett, Kelvin Sole, Steve Giddings, Lorna Owen, Bryony Golding

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