**Making the Arts Accessible - Transcription**

Episode 8

Emily Malen, Front of House and Access Development Manager at Nottingham Theatre Royal and Concert Hall

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*AG: So in this episode of making the Arts Accessible, I am delighted to be talking to Emily Malen, who is the Front of House and Access Development Manager at Nottingham Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall. So thank you very much for talking to me Emily.*

EM: You're very welcome. Thanks for having me.

*AG: So to start off, can you just tell us a bit about your job there in Nottingham and particularly relating to access, what's your remit, what you do, what are you most proud of?*

EM: Yes. Well, so access kind of sits everywhere in everyone's job at the venue. I am almost the spearhead or the nudger, someone people can run something by, and I help link people up with the relevant contacts. So someone in Education might do a video and then they say they want to have it audio described and have an interpreter on it. So I'm kind of a facilitator and enabler, but more importantly I guess I'm a listener because you only develop things through hearing peoples experiences and I never rest on our laurels. So actually having the Access lead sit in front of house is quite helpful because of the customer experience. You learn from their feedback. You learn from doing focus groups. You learn from observing how the vibe is when people visit your venues. You might notice there's a pinch point or a queue or that people always go to a certain accessible toilet and not to another one. So you go, ‘What can we put in place or what can we communicate to people, or have we miscommunicated to someone where the services are’, so it's ever changing. It's like an organic process, but also you can't really rest on your laurels either.

And also technology changes, so we have a hearing enhancement system that was put in both venues in the year 2000, but we're now in 2022 and people have smart phones, they have apps. And especially because we’ve come through COVID, so a lot of hygienic elements are now becoming quite key in terms of customer confidence so if you can enable them to experience the arts by bringing something that they are more comfortable with, whether it's their own set of headphones or the way their Bluetooth hearing aid works, it just enables them to access services like anyone else.

*AG: It's brilliant because you've got the Sennheiser MobileConnect which is great for broadcasting audio description to people's phones, isn't it? And you're talking about upgrading the hearing enhancement system, but these things all cost money so it sounds brilliant that you have the drive from the top to make sure that you have the good systems in place for all this…*

EM: Yes, like I said it's listening to customers and listening to people who say, ‘I want to visit your venue, but I can't because of this, this and this’. So such as like having a changing places toilet - if you could imagine saying to any customer, ‘Come to see a show, whether it's the Ring Cycle or a shorter show, and leave your house and four hours later you may return to your house but in that time frame there aren’t any facilities for you to visit a toilet’. I know I’d be nervous, so it's that thing of enabling everyone to have this choice and the ability to visit somewhere with respect and dignity, and make it a memorable experience, but for all the right reasons.

So yes, it’s listening to people’s thoughts and opinions, because I know that sometimes when I have had focus groups and you listen to people and they say, ‘Oh there was this lift that was developed but they put the button in the wrong place’. So actually you could spend a lot of money but if you listen to people, you end up making the right choices. So for instance, when we had a changing places toilet installed, we managed to secure some funds for that, we gathered customer feedback as part of the funding bid. And again, one of the users just said ‘When you put your hoist in, make sure it can be charged anywhere on the hoist mechanism’, because from their experience, hoists that have to be returned to one place to charge always end up not getting returned to that place to charge so when the next person comes to using it, it was always out of juice. So we made sure that we had a hoist that charged anywhere on the track. And again, we wouldn't have known that. But that was something so important to the users of that facility, and that was just gold dust for us.

*AG: Yes, it's so important what you're saying there about listening to the audience and their needs. I know that you have do you have a regular is it group that meets up, is it Seen and Sound?*

EM: Yes. Well I was part of that. It was a Midlands group but it has now kind of disbanded just because of various people leaving certain roles. But we were part of that to try get in one place all the information about audio description, sign language interpreted, and captioned performances, and just collate all the different venue access information. So it could be that someone, maybe they lived in Devon but they were coming to the Midlands to visit a friend so they could look up everything that was in that area.

So again, you just learn by best practise and networking and then you take on things from there to other things in a venue, whether it's how to best format large print or audio formats of the brochure, or having Braille. And we actually have an access register that enables customers to tell us in advance any access requirements they have. We had *Al Murray* last night and we had a lady tell us that her husband had had a stroke recently and he couldn't push her wheelchair easily, and she had certain access requirements. So they borrowed our wheelchair and one of our assistants helped to get them from the tram to their seats and back again. And they were just so thankful for that extra help that made such a difference to their evening and to their confidence. So that was brilliant.

*AG: Something I'm thinking about is that I've always felt that your venue has a very joined up way of thinking so like all the front of house staff are very on the ball. And it's got to be that way doesn’t it because someone has to ring up box office and just say I have this need and then it's immediately actioned and put in place. So that's all about communication isn't it and training?*

EM: Yes. So I oversee this communication through our box office systems. Every week I pull a report that shows anything that customers have told us and then I cascade that to various teams on the frontline. So yes, training and often say we have relaxed performances for people on the autistic spectrum or where its young babes in arms coming, or people living with dementia. So prior to a relaxed performance, I'd always do refresher training about what a relaxed performance was. And when we have new starters we always do access training with them. And as times change or say we have a new changing places toilet, or the new hearing enhancement system, we get the staff to see the facilities or say get their phone and download the app, go in the auditorium and listen to the audio description on their phone. So they’re experiencing the customer journey and learning the little nooks and crannies to remember about say being on the right Wi-Fi and just experiencing it. Because it's hard sometimes just having the theory or being told about something is great - you've almost got to be there and experience it.

And then we have stewards who attend the touch tours and help people and they all integrate. And some of our stewards also work in the box office. So again when they're taking a booking from a customer, because they've experienced the actual delivery of the performance, they are very knowledgeable there as well.

*AG: Yeah, that's so good. So what are your top tips for other theatres who might be looking to improve what they're doing that we haven't covered yet?*

EM: I suppose sometimes there is that fear factor. So prior to us doing the access register you are almost worried that you're going to either cause offence or do something wrong. And because there is the legal aspect as well about providing access, some people don’t do it for fear of getting it wrong, but then by not doing anything, you're almost standing by not making things accessible. So we work with certain companies or charities, like there's a great one called Attitude is Everything and they have a Charter of Best Practise and we've gone through the different levels. So we were awarded bronze and went to silver and then recently when we had our changing places toilet installed and some other things, we’ve now just recently gone up to gold. And because they are run by people living with a disability they’re forming all this best practise around live entertainment and the arts and that really helps us to know where we've done things well but also where the gaps are. And because every year you have a refresher. So they talk to us and they did great sessions as well when we were coming out of the pandemic so it was all about COVID passports and sort of the pros and cons of that. So they go to the nitty gritty issues. But I love it that for them, no question that I ask is a stupid question, and I say this to the staff. It's like, well if you are asking the question it's not a silly question because there's a reason you're asking it. And even if someone keeps asking the same question again, that will highlight to me where there might be an access need or a training need or information.

We also have the Autism Friendly award from the National Autistic Society. So you can go more niche with certain organisations that are for particular demographics, but it's trying to get that balancing act because every customer is important and of course you want to do everything for them, but sometimes you're balancing what you can do for blind and partially sighted people versus hard of hearing or deaf customers and then people with mobility problems or people living with dementia, or people on the autistic spectrum, and they all have different priorities. So what one customer might find most important, someone else might think it's not important to them. So it's trying to weigh up what you can implement that has the biggest impact.

*AG: You’ve just made me realise that huge role it is. I mean, so you're responsible for access but it combines with your front of house role.*

EM: Yes! And it is even when the shows are starting to be discussed and booked in. I realised it was sometimes a bit like the United Nations in that you sometimes have companies that do support access, but some may not so you have to open the conversation. So we actually got our contract rewritten to have access written into it. So any show was reminded that we fully support access and we would like to have as many accessible performances as possible, and also for the service providers, so say an audio describer, they might need a script in advance, so they might need to share a recording etc. So it was important to ask those questions so then if we do have an access performance, then we will require all this, this, this from you to make it happen. So yes, it's all about communication, but then ultimately it's all about enabling choice for the person who wants to come to the theatre to be able to choose when they do that.

*AG: Yes, and that's such a good point actually, getting access in at the contract stage.*

EM: When I first started in access probably around 2006/7, there was a bit of a reshuffle just in our venue and access fell into the front of house team which was kind of a blessing in disguise really and it was just when I first got given the role. So I went around all the departments asking people ‘Is there anything accesswise that happens that you wish something would happen prior to that? And there were things like holding back some of the best available seats from the box office so they haven't all been sold. And technical said like we need to know something six months in advance, but then please remind us a week in advance, and then do remind us a couple of days in advance because they're always reacting to the latest situation, sometimes my role is almost to nudge people. You book things in maybe three years in advance, then you're sorting things out 12 months advance, then the programme will be issued and it’s like, okay, this is happening six months in advance and then it's a week, then 24 hours and then it's even like the hour up to it.

And also with the access register, people can enable or tell us anything they want to about themselves. So someone says ‘I will be using audio description’ or ‘I'm going to be using the interpreter’, and a bit like we had for *Mamma Mia* recently. I pulled that report and I could see that someone wanted to use the interpreter was far back on tier one and I knew that the interpreter was stage left. And I pre-empted that by saying to the staff on the door that when that customer ticket gets beeped, tell that customer that they welcome to move down

close to the stalls and where other customers have told us they like to sit to view the interpreter. And that customer did move into the new seats and just was like ‘Oh thank you very much!’.

So it's almost like you have that data as long as its input in there and obviously there will also be people don't want to declare that they have an access need and that’s absolutely fine as well. So say when you have captioned performances, you don’t know who’s benefitting but you’ll over hear comments at the end of the show like ‘Oh I understood blah blah’. But there are other wider needs as well, so you can use screens for captions but there’s almost lots of benefits like you could use them for marketing. and again like you were saying with budgets, if you could sell it that it answers this problem or offers a solution here or another potential opportunity there if it hits lots of outcomes, it's not just saying oh, it's just for access, it is great that it makes something accessible, but it also can be used for this if there isn't an accessible and so yeah, yes, things like that.

*AG: I know you mentioned earlier about focus groups, do you regularly ask access customers or or your audience in general, you know how you're doing?*

EM: We send out an access newsletter and that says at the bottom please do contact us we have off the again our access register an if we are looking at a new project like when we did, I mean MobileConnect has been in the pipeline for about three or four years and it was probably through the most strongest complaints we were getting and then ultimately then we formed a focus group from all these sort of letters of different users with different needs and then they kind of formed like a working group for that access need. And then ultimately actually one of those ladies, she starred in our video of how to familiarise yourself with the new equipment, so from someone saying I can't access shows to being in a video to show other customers how to link the phone up so. A lot of our focus groups as I

Also consider linked to Nottingham City Council, we have focus groups that way. So there's like a disability involvement group. So when we were doing some refurbs and new wheelchair user positions and a lift in the theatre, It was a mixture of wheelchair users and blind and partially sighted people, deaf people, and again they helped us with the changing places toilet as well. So we almost say we have these plans even is this door handle suitable to have on our doors? So. Yes. You just build up a rapport with them and then they know someone else who might be best fit with another project that you've got in the pipeline. Then yeah, it kind of again, it evolves really and we've had a diversity group that inclusion and diversity that almost came through the education department but it was again looking out to see customers that might not yet be our customers, and why may they not be and how can we encourage individuals or again that that fear factor or threshold clear and come in through the doors and experience the arts, because if you’ve never been brought to the theatre. How do you know that it's something to spend your money on to try.

Yeah I know I mean we at Opera North, there’s been lots of community outreach work go on in that sphere and that's really interesting and it kind of links through to accessibility as well. Doesn't when people feel especially if they have any That means that will be looked after. But you just said something there I have to praise you because coming to your venue as an audio describer on some of the Opera North tours, I always notice how it's just every single person along that track, because access covers every department doesn't it. Like you said you know to towards marketing and have it in the brochure, the information about the shows. You talk to the technical team they need to know when it touched tour is happening, or a lighting check for the signer and going to your venue you know we always get really helpful sound engineer checking the audio description equipment because some of these things they;’re so niche,. So the quite technical the setup of an audio description in the hearing whether you can show in your ears. Plus the cell to believe your own voice. And if that engineer on the day isn't quite sure, but it doesn't quite work, you know that person coming that night might not be able to hear you loud enough in their ear. So it's every step is so crucial and at Nottingham it's always seamless. Everyone knows what they're doing, right down to you. Get a bottle of water in the audio description room – and that touch is so sweet and so thoughtful.

EM: Yes, in every Department as well. We will then again access to sit in every role. But then there were extra passionate people in each department, so we almost implemented access champions. So say you might have a technician that knows all the access bits and bobs. Then when I create my memo saying who's the technical contact, they'll give me a name. But if there's someone that might not have as much experience as them, they'll get talked through the process prior to the show, because it must be awful as a provider to turn up and almost not to be expected. So it's almost that warm welcome that we want to give to our customers front of house and again maybe that's because I sit in front of house, it's all about that warm welcome. Our customers are also the people who visit us backstage because we're a touring venue every show technically is a customer because it's hiring our stage so. We almost have two sets of customers every night. It's those that are performing and bringing the show to us and those that are watching this show. So yeah it's it's great in the end like that affecting like the tech team, couldn't do it without them as in I'm, I'm obviously technical expert but they they just make the magic happen. our support what it can do or if if when we always have someone sat in the audience listening to the audio description and if there's a problem then it's almost like our staff are aware of it because they may be sent happening in there is so they can go and find a technician rather than just waiting for the interval for a customer, to go ‘I couldn't hear anything in the first half’. So it's trying to offer the best that you can do and that's almost all you can and and then you can learn from things if there are little wobbles, but again then that just identifies any training or any sort of evaluating. Or anything that on the next visit and like I think we touched on in a different conversation, it was almost if there's an audio description on the same day as the caption performance, have you thought about where each provider can sit to not impact on someone else? Then again, because we have two venues, we have one setup in the theatre and another in the concert hall and you trying to see each venue's different so you trying to make sure that each venue has the right offering and because access hopefully does ingrain itself in everyone’s role, if someone were to leave or be off sick, that service is still on offer. From the venue because it almost doesn't leave with one person that was overseeing it and that is really encouraging because I think again when we implemented relaxed performances, I think we're almost all of us are very proud but almost all very teary because we just like ‘everyone just made this work’ and then you just. Get told afterwards like an individual smiled for the first time in years and you just go, oh. That’s impactful!

*AG: Yeah, yeah. It's certainly a very rewarding type of job, isn't it, when it goes well and you know that people really made an amazing experience. Yes.*

EM: Yeah. And it's all about kindness and welcoming. Because I think what I’ve come to experiences must be that some people in their daily life are always barriers and. Sometimes they assume that that's what they have to fight and actually when people experience that, it's almost like the social model of disability is actually being addressed, it's just something that people realise going oh, this is just lovely, whereas I think sometimes if you've always almost had to be fighting for your own ability to access something, that's almost how you might approach things as your own defence mechanism. So there may be the odd customer where we kind of if there is something we've missed, it's almost like you invite them and let's get a solution and you can help us to sort of make the change. And like we said earlier, it's all about listening because sometimes people, that’s all they want because there must be some experiences where people were just shut down and not heard. And that's awful.

AG: That's such good point listening. I love that. I'm going to take that away from this talk. So just a quick thing, Emily, how did you get into this yourself, are you a sort of theatre person in your background?

Kind of, I'm not a performer myself really, but I was always at school I'd either be doing this stage makeup or I'd be doing a bit of lighting. So I was always like one of the very integral yet in custody where that it's against all those magic. Again, the audience wouldn’t know, but there's so many hard working people behind the scenes that make it seem so slick and I think it was. I liked supporting people to enable them to do their best and then I think just through peoples’ well-being and seeing the impact it could make, it was all about just giving things a go and actually the more we tackled what seemed to be difficult and hard and like something that you just think ooh this, this is stomach churning, coz you're not sure if you're going to do it right? And then the more you do it and the more you work with people/

like we created a dementia friendly information flyer and basically I went to a few care homes and had other focus groups there through the Alzheimers Society,, and we wrote a flyer with people living with dementia telling me what was important to them, like don’t put it on shiny paper because I will struggle to read that and why I wouldn't know that. So it was just great and always have the right colour scheme and all of that and and it's just, it's kind of again common sense, like why not talk to the people that have all the answers when you’re developing your services because it makes all the difference. Like I never knew there were two types of Braille life. So I asked our Braille provider, , I'd like, I will definitely research that and then with our Braille provider and again that enabled someone to come to a Carol service because then it was all in the right type of Braille that they needed. So it was yes, it's just great. So it's always a happy accident that I fell into it, but I think through just being able to see the change and it just kind of. And I started in the venue in 2005 and so yeah, access was more like 2007. So I think, yeah, the job as well just changes as the time changes and actually seeing now there is more of a positivitiy around access, whereas I think when I first started it felt like it was a bolt on it as an afterthought, whereas now it's, it's a lot more inclusive and seeing that change is great.

AG: And I mean, you know there are lots of progression for lots of ways. It is always moving forward. Like you said, you can't ever rest on your laurels and just go ‘Ah, we've done it, now Things move on. Are there any particular sort of progressions that you are excited about that are happening right now?

EM: Well it's almost establishing what the new norm is. After two years of COVID rocking everyone's world and some people who are the most vulnerable or some people whose confidence has been bashed because of that anxiety and everything surrounding it, you want to give everyone a nice virtual hug to say we are still here to look after you and but if you need baby steps in order to come back into the venue, we can do that. We even offer familiarisation visits which were first introduced for people on the autistic spectrum to get a familiar sense of their surroundings or their carers to, but it almost seems like that is something that people need now more than ever, just to get a sense of ‘What’s the venue like now cause I can't almost remember’ or ‘What are your COVID protocols or have you relaxed anything?’. So yeah, people’s lives have changed and people have different priorities that some people now because they worked with the venue for twenty odd years, they then thought, oh, it might be time for me to move on and retire, whereas then you lose people that have such knowledge and then you’re like so what is the new norm in terms of who are we now and what is the team moving forward?

It's exciting but it's quite overwhelming as well.

*AG: Yes, no I I get that - I think most workplaces in general are really going through a massive change.*

EM: But just being very thankful as well that we survived as it were. It was crazy what happened during lockdown, so if you said to us back then you’d be back having live performances now, I’d say ‘I almost don’t believe you!’.

*AG: Do you have any memorable or favourite experiences that connect to making the arts accessible?*

EM: Well like I said about seeing people smile for the first time at the relaxed performances, or having the changing places toilet and just enabling people to be able to partake like anyone else.

There was a scenario where we had a performance of a musical and actually the iron – that curtain got stuck down and wouldn’t come back up. So we have to cancel certain shows for numerous reasons, but that meant the show couldn’t go on. But it was also sign language interpreted that night. So it was the case of going ‘Oh, we can make an announcement but we need to make it accessible for the deaf members in the audience’. So the sign language interpreter would have to be stood on stage in all lit up. But we had them in a side dress circle box so it was pointed out to me if they're not lit up at the same time that the announcement is made, a deaf audience won't know to look at you. So I was going back and forth, but then what we decided was as a backup, in case the spotlight didn’t happen, me and a couple of others had our torches ready to shine at her. But what the audience wouldn't have known is that we were crawling on the floor at her feet, just lying on the floor, just waiting for this announcement. So it's all these things that. You almost become an understudy for the this is happening. This is probably going to be fine but if it's not we need a backup plan. So that one seems to stick in the mind!

So I think it's all that is. Yeah, is everyone pulling together and making it just memorable.

*AG: I love that - the care that you take and the thought that you put in there that you all you got these backup solutions ready to make sure theatre-going experiences is accessible to everyone. It's been really brilliant hearing all this stuff. You do incredible work there and I'm sure people will find everything that you said fascinating. I've certainly learnt lots of stuff from you were just right now. So do you have any recommendations of good sources of information that you tend to look at?*

EM: Well like I said. Attitude is Everything have a Charter of Best Practice - it's like my little bible that I refer to. And again, if you had a customer situation they are a good sounding board to ring up for a chat. And there are companies like Vocaleyes, there’s Stagetext there’s TheatreSign. So all those kind of access providers that if you didn't know where to start with providing an accessible performance, they have certain expertises in those areas. There's Signed Culture, there's lots of organisations that you can all offer you advice.

Your customers often have specialisms as well so like we have people who are blind or partially sighted but there’s a man who has his own consultancy company. So sometimes when we're thinking about certain things, we’ll ask him. But it it's also that fine line of respecting people and sometimes not everyone will want to do something for free. And then networking or benchmarking and knowing what others do.

There’s a group of us in a Front of House Forum where you bounce ideas off each other, and you’re on the same vibe. And by sharing, you realise it’s OK sometimes to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Lately the transition of people going back into the theatre, people are all kind of experiencing the same things.

*AG: Yeah, that's interesting. I think I heard about it. Because what I find really interesting is for you the theatres that are receiving the same shows, there are similar audiences and you'll get similar things. I love the fact that all you front of house people are sharing knowledge of specific audiences. And I know it sounds awful to kind of lump people together. But there might be things that that do relate to that specific show that it's good for you as a venue to know about.*

EM: Yes for sure. Or even like whether it's your lovely *Rocky Horror Show*, what might be allowed in the auditorium or what isn’t, are people allowed to throw rice or not? Certain restrictions are there as well. So it's just getting ready with the planning, the organisation, the delivery. And so everyone is communicated to and we can offer the best possible service because people are often repeating many things. So it’s nice when people can know what to expect.

*AG: Yes, and I guess for you guys as bigger theatres you’ve got these networks and things but say for a smaller theatre or a smaller company putting things on I guess just talk to your nearest larger theatre because they probably experience some of the things that you might have questions about? Find the access person*

EM: Yes, definitely get in touch. We've even had it where say if some equipment fails if you've got a good relationship with another nearby theatre you can contact them. It's always good to have that working relationship. I mean I know there is a certain element of competition, but ultimately it's the customer that is going to decide where they want to sit or what they want to see where. And say even with the access register, other local theatres have come along and spoken to us because we've already implemented it and they want to start doing it and they can ask us ‘What what did you have to do’, or ‘Did you have to write to everyone?’ and finding out the pros and cons, what to watch out for and not forget to do as well.

*AG: That's fantastic. Thank you so much for talking to me, Emily. I think we've covered loads there, and it’s been really interesting, so thank you for your time.*

EM: You’re very welcome. Thank you for having me.

**Links**

Royal Theatre Nottingham and Royal Concert Hall

<https://trch.co.uk/whats-on/>

Attitude is Everything

<https://attitudeiseverything.org.uk/>

Vocaleyes – audio description listings and information

<https://vocaleyes.co.uk/>

StageText – captions in theatre

<https://www.stagetext.org/>

TheatreSign – BSL interpreters and performances

<https://theatresign.com/>

Signed Culture – supporting BSL access to the arts

<https://www.signedculture.org.uk/>