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# PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF ACCESSIBLE PERFORMING ARTS

## SUMMARY

Over its 16-year history, the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival has come a long way in providing transformative performing arts experiences to as broad an audience as possible. Their innovative approach and investment in the community results in greater accessibility for everyone.

## STORY

PuSh International Performing Arts Festival is home to some of Vancouver's most contemporary, thought-provoking, and compelling performances. Founded in 2003, the PuSh festival is now in its 16th year and has become known for its risk-taking, transformative experiences, and hosting respectful collaboration and dialogue.

But though PuSh prides itself on being adventurous, it wants to ensure their content can still be accessed by all. If PuSh is an organization of explorers, they believe every map should be in braille.

## INCLUSIVITY THROUGH INNOVATION

One of PuSh's values is diversity in arts and people, and the festival has always envisioned itself as a catalyst for community development. This led to a natural desire for being more inclusive and accessible, and for pushing the boundaries of what is possible—both are necessary in the young and little-explored world of accessible performing arts.

After receiving a grant in 2014, PuSh began implementing accessible performances, starting with one live audio described performance (through VocalEye, a Vancouver-based company that specializes in live description of performances for the blind, partially sighted and visually impaired), one American Sign Language (ASL)-interpreted program, and an emphasis on community tickets—complimentary or subsidised tickets to people who may experience barriers to attendance, such as financial or cultural challenges.

In 2016, the festival invested in a dedicated staff person to support its accessibility program and hired Anika Vervecken as their new Accessibility Coordinator.

To bring accessibility to the forefront, she began by asking a tough question: “What are we really doing other than just making ourselves look good?” Thanks to Anika’s rigour and dedication, the answer to that question is now obvious for the festival: quite a lot.

### IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY IS MORE THAN JUST TICKING BOXES

Anika says it was important to spend some time thinking about what they could actually do to eliminate barriers that stop people from being able to attend shows at the festival. The festival began to question what they were doing, why they were doing it, and whether it was effective or if it was just “ticking boxes”.

Anika says her limited resources forced her to think in a lot of different directions to make the PuSh accessible experience as good as possible. Now at PuSh, accessibility isn’t just being able to enjoy a performance as a person living with autism; it’s also how you’re greeted at the door, whether the staff is able to serve a Deaf patron in ASL and knows how to assist someone in a wheelchair, whether a person with a disability is treated respectfully, and so much more.

### LOW-HANGING FRUIT FIRST

One massive shift in thinking was moving the focus from pursuing resource-intensive projects to focusing on adding accessible aspects of the festival that were already there and just needed to be uncovered. Doing this allowed Anika to find low-cost solutions for making more shows accessible with limited resources. For example, the festival requested captions for Jaha Koo’s Cuckoo, which already had subtitles due to the show’s mostly Korean performance. This meant only the titles for the text in English needed to be added. It turned out the show already had them ready to use, resulting in a more accessible performance at no extra cost.

### START BEFORE OPENING NIGHT

The festival also encourages artists to integrate accessibility into performances from the very beginning of the creative process, during the creation of the show. This has led to even more artists thinking about accessibility from a performance’s inception, resulting in greatly enhanced experiences for all audiences. Anika recommends artists create an “accessibility rider”, in which they describe what is needed from the festival to make their performance accessible. And artists are often happy to help—Jan Martens, the choreographer for Sweat Baby Sweat, wrote an essay-like accessible introduction for Deaf and hard of hearing audience members that delved deep into how the soundscape for the show had been created and how it connected to the visuals, an added bonus even for hearing dance lovers.

PuSh now offers a suite of accessibility-oriented services, including sighted guides, a complimentary ticket for companions, training in basic ASL for volunteers and staff, and support persons who assist attendees throughout their PuSh experience. But even these seemingly best practices must be well-thought-out.



## UNIQUELY UNDERSTOOD AND INCLUDED

Anika points out that helping someone with a disability should be done with an open dialogue on a human-to-human level, free of assumptions. “If an autistic person asks for a visual story, we might assume they’ll prefer the relaxed performance. But maybe they’d actually prefer an ‘uptight performance’ where there’s less distraction.”

Relaxed performances can be helpful for people on the Autism Spectrum, people with sensory and communication disorders, neurological disorders, or a learning disability. They include visual stories for the venue and show, always-on house lights, reduced sound and light, permission to move around or make noise (making the space more welcoming for someone with Tourette’s, for example), a ban on

“shushing”, and a chill-out space for when the show is too intense. By having a dialogue first, assistance can be provided in the way that it is most helpful.

That level of customer service comes from working with people with disabilities to get a better understanding of how the festival can improve. The festival works with a Deaf consultant and a low vision consultant as well as engaging people with lived experience to teach at the accessibility training—this means staff and volunteers have an opportunity to learn directly from a person with autism, for example, and ask questions, building a crucial bridge of understanding and inclusivity as well as adhering to the “nothing about us without us” principle.

## A POSITIVE REVIEW

PuSh's shift in thinking has resulted in three to four times as many shows per year being opened up to a larger audience, using new formats and methods including introductions to low vision or Deaf and hard of hearing friendly shows, live description, ASL interpretation, captions or subtitles, and relaxed performances.

The festival's strategy has not been to try to increase ticket sales, but to maximize the amount of people who see shows with special provisions, often by giving away complimentary tickets or subsidizing them. They see this all as an investment in the community and the future, training volunteers and staff, creating understanding and friendships, and building a more diverse performance-going community.

A happy by-product of PuSh's focus on accessibility has been the surprising amount of publicity on the festival and its accessible performances. PuSh is now being seen as a leader in accessibility, all while reminding people about accessibility and its importance. For the festival, thinking about accessibility is permeating everything they do, and everybody is part of the process from the director to artists, venues to volunteers. And it's working: the festival receives frequent comments about how important their accessible performances are to people.

PuSh has shown that accessibility is not just about "ticking boxes". It's something to be considered and integrated from the very beginning to ensure that every audience member can enjoy a transformational performance.

## BREAK A LEG: TOP TIPS

- Don't limit yourself to what you can do, but think beyond to where you want to be.
- Identify someone in your organization that will be fully responsible for making change and empower them to act.
- Don't make assumptions about the needs of your guests; instead ask questions and create a human-to-human interaction that identifies their unique needs.
- Identify and plan for accessibility considerations from the beginning of the creative process.
- Work with others to identify some quick wins and partner on longer-term improvements.

## PERFORMANCE ARTS & ACCESSIBILITY

- There are now one billion people living with a disability, which is 15% of the world's population; that number will continue to grow as the population ages. (Source: World Health Organization)
- According to the World Health Organization, results from over 3,000 studies over the last two decades have identified a major role for the arts in the prevention of ill health, promotion of health, and management and treatment of illness across the lifespan.
- Culture products generated \$1.7 billion in visitor spending in 2016, representing 1.9% of total tourism spending in Canada. Of all cultural products, visitors spent the most on performing arts, which includes attending concerts and plays, followed by film and video, crafts and books. (Source: Statistics Canada)
- Arts and culture in B.C. has grown nearly 25% since 2010, a rate significantly higher than the national average. (Source: BC Arts Council)

## OTHER INFORMATION

Thanks to Anika Vervecken, Accessibility Coordinator of the PuSh Festival, for her participation in this article.

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