

A New Associate Director Position: Consultation Report

Ad Infinitum Productions CIO

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1. Executive Summary

“Ask a Deaf Director - ‘Are you the next director of the National Theatre? If not - why not?’” - Consultee.

Ad Infinitum (AI) has been working with Deaf artists and leaders from the performance Sign Language community since 2012, collaborating on multiple theatre productions, working on commissions and developing our organisation to improve accessibility and Deaf Awareness. But in 2020, in response to our Deaf colleagues who expressed how difficult it was to forge a career as a Director, we began thinking about what we could do. In March-May 2021 we held paid consultation sessions asking 5 UK-based Deaf artists and directors to respond to a brief exploring the idea of creating an Associate Director position at AI.

We sent the brief (see Appendix (i) The Brief) to:

- **Rinkoo Barpaga**, freelance theatre maker and comedian
- **Jonny Cotsen**, performance artist, facilitator and consultant
- **Matthew Gurney**, freelance theatre and film actor/maker/director
- **Jenny Sealey**, artistic director of Graeae Theatre Company
- **Sophie Stone**, freelance theatre and TV actor/maker/director

The consultation process highlighted the lack of opportunity for Sign Language using Deaf Directors in a hearing-dominated theatre sector - but also in the arts more broadly. It’s an issue rooted in historic, oppressive, sector-wide and societal barriers that are faced by artists, creatives and the British Deaf Community as a whole. Every consultee was enthusiastic about creating an Associate Director role at Ad Infinitum (AI) for a Deaf Director - but also clear about what we need to be aware of and what barriers need tearing down in order to make it happen.

Exploring the idea of a bespoke role that is specifically designed, working with Deaf and hearing partners, mentors, organisations and theatres is an exciting opportunity. But it also highlights what is missing, lacking or poorly provided in terms of infrastructure within the sector - this includes:

1. Learning - workshops, courses, (including Deaf-led) shadowing opportunities.
2. A lack of networks and ways to connect within the established/mainstream theatre world as well as a lack of Deaf Awareness by those in powerful positions.
3. Showcasing - where are the regular scratch nights, showcase events, and bite-sized moments to test ideas, safe spaces to try out new work?
4. Time and money - when the opportunities do arise, they’re more often than not ‘flash-in-the-pan’, rare, and one-off chances that don’t go nearly far enough to adequately support or give enough time, money and resources required.

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Thanks to the generosity of the five artists we consulted, these consultation meetings and this report offer a much deeper insight into the barriers that stand in our way - but they also shed light on how we could work together to start tearing them down and co-creating better opportunities for directors (as well as artists and creatives) who are Sign Language Users and/or Deaf working in the sector. As one consultee said: "I believe the cycle can be broken. We are planting seeds for change and growth"

2. Introduction

In 2020 Ad Infinitum (AI) was awarded Elevate funding from Arts Council England. As part of that journey, our intention was to explore and design an Associate Director position at AI, then within 2-3 years find funding for the role, and recruit someone. However, we were keen to sense-check if that was the best mechanism for achieving better opportunities for Deaf directors and if so, how it should be developed. Fundamental to this idea is designing the role in consultation and collaboration with Deaf artists and directors working in the UK today so that the resulting position responds to the needs of Deaf directors and isn't created solely by a team without the necessary lived experience.

The 5 questions we asked participants led to broad, wide ranging and important discussions - so rather than structure this report according to our questions, I have instead been led by the consultants' responses, identifying the themes and topics raised in discussion.

In this report the terms used to describe identity have all been agreed by our contributors who are Sign Language Users and who identify as Deaf. The report is made up of the participants' own comments in British Sign Language (BSL)/English and interpreted via live BSL interpretation that I noted on paper in English, or recorded via our Zoom consultation meetings where possible. I have included these comments to avoid as much as possible any meaning, intention or nuance getting 'lost in translation' or reduced by my own attempts to summarise. The comments have been anonymised, to differentiate between consultees each person has been randomly assigned with a capital letter in brackets as follows: (A), (B), (C), (D) and (E).

A Note On Language: We recognise that language in the area of identity is contested and evolving. There is no strong consensus on acceptable language yet. Understanding this we have chosen to use the terms 'Deaf' and 'Sign Language Users/Community' but respect that there are a range of terms in use that others will prefer.

George Mann - Co-Artistic Director, Ad Infinitum, November 2022.

3. Opportunity

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The hunger for such opportunities, the lack of opportunities, and how exciting this role could be...

(A) A Deaf Associate Director scheme like this is an opportunity to privately equip Deaf directors with everything they need to enter a rehearsal room and say “I know what the f*@k I’m talking about”

(C) Deaf directors are really hungry for opportunities, they’d queue down the street for this!

(A) There are not enough opportunities for Deaf directors - and the opportunities that do exist are not in British Sign Language (BSL) and involve reading and writing in English (a second language for many BSL-Users).

Sometimes there are assistant director opportunities that come up - but usually they are with a hearing director, in a hearing dominated environment. If you want to inspire Deaf directors there needs to be a different angle or approach.

Where are the workshops that offer the chance to explore the ideas of Deaf directors? To explore something they have thought of, written or signed about, a chance to direct on their own terms? That’s what directing is, an art that needs practising, not just preparation, or learning information about how it works ‘technically’.

There are not many opportunities for Deaf directors/artists to be in those kinds of spaces.

(E) If you’re born or raised as Deaf in the UK you get used to rejection: traditionally there have not been many opportunities in theatre / film, even though there are loads of theatre and film companies and organisations, really the chances of finding work are very limited. So there haven’t been many opportunities like this one before - it’s an unknown, and a risk. I would love more original Deaf stories to be told rather than hearing stories.

(A) Current opportunities approach it backwards. We need to address the lack of opportunities, education and experience first - everyone needs this, right? Not just Deaf directors. Then from a position of knowledge, experience and confidence, Deaf directors can go into theatres and companies and teach hearing people how to work with Deaf directors, and can also pass on their knowledge to other upcoming Deaf directors too.

(D) I’m excited about this scheme - organisations should be thinking about this and it’s great that AI is.

(B) A Deaf AD at AI is a good idea!

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There are other opportunities out there for Deaf artists (Ramps on the Moon, Unlimited and companies like Graeae and Birds of Paradise) but they feel one-off-ish. They're often aimed at supporting Deaf talent but don't go far enough or give directors a chance to actually direct.

(D) We need to ignite, inspire and change - will it be possible? A lot of Deaf people I know don't see themselves as part of what 'art' means, or identify as 'artists' in that way. But I believe the cycle can be broken. We are planting seeds for change and growth.

4. Barriers (A-J)

(A) The lack of Deaf directors; (B) Ableism and the lack of knowledge and Deaf Awareness in the hearing sector; (C) Fear and failure; (D) Time; (E) Language and culture; (F) Power dynamics; (G) Access; (H) Networking; (I) Mental health and emotional needs; (J) Britain vs. the USA and abroad.

A. A lack of Deaf directors

(A) There are hardly any Deaf directors in the UK. Until a body of Deaf directors exists it's really hard for the general theatre sector to trust Deaf directors when there aren't enough of them out there. Anyone can say "I'm a director" - but this can set Deaf directors up to fail. We'd be in a stronger position if we did the development work first, and then go into a theatre or organisation - not go in green and feeling unconfident in a system that isn't built for us. If we make it clear that all directors - not just Deaf directors - need this training, experience and space to develop their practice and skills - then Deaf directors will more easily step into this role.

(C) This hasn't been done before at a hearing company - most Deaf artists will go to a hearing company to be a consultant around the integration of BSL, but not to direct... An associate or assistant director would be good - as consultants our opinion isn't always listened to, but as Deaf directors we'd have the last word.

(B) Ask a Deaf director - "are you the next director of the national theatre? If not - why not?" Work back from that (or another) ambition; start small, baby steps...

B. Ableism and the lack of knowledge and Deaf Awareness in the hearing sector

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(C) There needs to be real and profound Deaf Awareness Training within the sector about Deaf culture and language: Deaf people should be treated with the understanding and respect they deserve.

(B) If you have one Sign Language User in a theatre or organisation surrounded by hearing people, all too often responsibility falls on Deaf shoulders to 'educate'.

(C) We can't be expected to teach or educate when we act, or direct or get a job in theatre - this needs to be paid for and done separately.

Let's discuss "Hearing Fragility": hearing people need to learn about Deaf culture, language and history - to become Deaf Aware - but that means making mistakes. Deaf people are more tolerant about f*@k ups - f*@k ups are a good thing, it's how we all learn, so hearing people shouldn't be scared to do that. Equally we don't need to 'call out' hearing people for their mistakes ...however, once they've learnt, they need to not repeat the mistake!

(E) Remember that the Deaf Sign Language Community has different preferences about how they engage with and make theatre. We need to be mindful of the fact that if the Deaf Associate Director is working with a hearing director or other colleagues - this person could be ignorant about Deaf culture, and then it would become the Deaf director's "responsibility" to deal with that. For example, when I was working with a hearing director in a mainstream theatre who wanted to create a "Deaf choir" as part of a new production, but the Deaf people involved didn't like this idea - the director refused to listen to or acknowledge our concerns and we ended up feeling oppressed. It's because many hearing people don't understand the Deaf perspective.

For this scheme to work well understanding is needed on both sides.

(B) It's an ableist world: how do we work to develop resilience? The profession is brutal, competitive, cut-throat, critical and judgemental. We need to develop a thick skin.

(D) There's a lot of ableism in buildings who control and set the parameters in the sector - they all want to "help" - but it's not what Deaf people want. They want Deaf leadership and, or, co-leadership; a genuine space for them in the sector, on stage, in buildings etc.

(B) Within the hearing theatre sector there is an 'acceptable face of deafness' and a tendency to want to work with Deaf creatives, but they want to work in English, not in BSL, and so Sign Language Users are often left out while Deaf artists who have strong English skills can be the 'acceptable face of deafness'. BSL is now being seen as a 'beautiful' language, so many more Deaf creatives are being employed - BSL consultants and some assistant directors, for example. But these creatives still tend to be the only Deaf person around the table with (majority) hearing creatives and rather than be valued for their artistic input, they're asked to contribute knowledge around BSL and access.

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(D) Deaf children were taken out of English in education in the 70's-80's, and sign language has for over a century been forbidden or discouraged in most educational settings until recently - this is why working bilingually can be challenging. The top Deaf talent in the UK is mostly led by those born hearing and brought up bilingual (with BSL and English) - they have an advantage.

C. Fear and failure

(A) There's a lot of pressure in our industry to 'sell yourself'. Fears don't always come out in the moment, but sometimes later in a process or a relationship. So make sure you create a safe space where you can ask Deaf directors "what are your worries or fears?" and make space for any questions they might have - so that together you can find solutions and answers.

It's important Deaf directors know who they are before they're out there directing - rather than being thrown into the system.

(C) Deaf directors can be frightened of losing their job if they speak up to hearing people - I've spent decades not being able to say 'no'. There are cultural differences and misunderstandings: for example Deaf artists can be direct and forward - and hearing people can think this is aggressive, when it's not. I have learnt over time to get in early with any issues, not to let them simmer and then boil over.

For a Deaf director it needs to be about developing yourself, not about proving yourself to hearing people.

(D) I don't feel I have the confidence to go for directing jobs...maybe it's past negative experiences affecting me? I get nervous everytime I go into a space... if someone has a beard and mumbles and I don't understand, for example. Regardless of access, I always want to know who I'm working with. Deaf people don't feel comfortable or have any sense of ownership in buildings and theatres - even though theatre is in their bodies, culture and languages already. There's more connection to film than theatre.

(B) I have never placed myself in a hearing organisation - I'd be too scared. AI needs to be aware that part of what the company needs to be doing is creating a safe and challenging space to learn in. Everyone needs to accept there will be 'learning on the job' - we all need to feel free to fail. We all need to talk about the elephant in the room...if you only knew all the mistakes I had made...

(A) Don't be scared of my warnings - I don't want this to stop you doing something - don't be afraid of the truth and of honesty from Deaf artists and directors - but make sure you listen.

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(B) Transparency from the start is crucial: we cannot set anyone up to fail - or inadvertently trick them into an impossible situation.

(A) It can't be self-serving.

Know why you are doing this, ask: are we here to support a Deaf director's journey? Are we collaborating - so there's equal power? Or is this serving us - ? - appropriation.

Be careful, sensitive, be transparent and know why you are doing it - it's important to avoid tick-boxing and provoking mistrust - it's not about elevating you, but Deaf directors. Use your privilege to make it happen - this can be a good thing - but without virtue signalling.

Share your networks.

Create a space for Deaf directors taking small steps, supporting where you are needed - a bit like an outside overseeing body - people will know what your role is and it will build trust.

D. Time

(A) In a hearing environment - a Deaf director will be trying to follow what is going on in the room, working with interpreters, taking notes, etc., but this takes time and it's very easy to lose track, and then confidence as a result. You need to give space and time to address their questions.

(C) Sometimes it's about having enough time to start work: I found out I had got a job starting in two weeks - great! - but I needed to sort out my Access to Work (AtW) in a short amount of time...what if I can't? What if the 'allowance' they give me has run out and cannot cover the time of the engagement? It puts my employment prospects at risk. It's so stressful...

Also, it could be important for a Deaf Associate Director to point out to a hearing colleague/director when they or Deaf actors might need more time - or to let them know that what is happening is a Deaf cultural issue, for example.

(D) It's important to learn on the job: but that means being able to learn in your own time and feeling able to do it. However, long hours can be too hard and off putting - for example, I often need time out or time off because linguistically it's intense, difficult and exhausting for me.

E. Language and culture

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(A) BSL FIRST! Every approach and communication with a first language BSL-Using Deaf artist should be video and BSL first. BSL contracts and letters of agreement are necessary otherwise there's a risk that your collaborators miss something important, or don't understand certain aspects of a contract - so video contracts as standard.

This may feel complex now - but it doesn't have to be - the process of doing this is good preparation, good for communication and good for understanding what the different needs of your collaborators are.

(C) Having the brief for this consultation in BSL was great, so for this report, when it's sent to the consultants to approve, sending it as a BSL report would be much better - and would help make it concise and clear for the Deaf consultants. Communication in English means there's a danger of misinterpretation, wasting time and energy... I have seen this happen many times with Deaf people in the workplace.

BSL should be on the English curriculum like it is in Scotland!

F. Power dynamics

(E) Consider that a Deaf person might not want a hearing 'boss' or director above them. We need to be mindful of power dynamics...I have been taught skills through working with hearing theatre makers, the quality of storytelling in hearing theatre is a bit further ahead - but [this role] could be hard for Deaf people to accept.

(C) Often, we are not included in decision making, assumptions are made - without consulting Deaf directors and artists - there are a lot of very controlling hearing people. If I'm thinking about how we might overcome the 'hearing people know best' attitude and the lack of trust in Deaf people, it's about respect. This is very important. Respect a person's job or role. If you're working with Deaf directors - let them direct and do their job, don't undermine or disempower them.

Beware of consultation becoming a tokenistic exercise. A hearing director who wanted to make their play "completely accessible to all" hired me as a BSL-consultant. I tried to explain to the director that this approach can actually be quite overwhelming or distracting for a Deaf BSL-Using audience, rather than helpful. Perhaps they could consider targeting a particular group or groups, rather than 'all' groups who need access? In response the director said "you don't know what you're talking about". This was a tokenistic exercise, bringing in a Deaf or Disabled artist and consultant to give the 'ok' to a project - rather than to genuinely find access solutions together - this is not great, or collaborative - and makes you feel like you have no power.

The Deaf Associate Director needs to be someone that can constructively and creatively challenge the hearing director. We need to get to the point as a sector where we can't

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simply 'say no' to a Deaf director / artist / creative - they need to have equal power in the room along with hearing directors / artists / creatives.

A lot of the time, it can come down to sound - this is when Deaf people in the room are excluded. For example, with Extraordinary Wall of Silence [AI's production which premiered 2019] the sound and sound designer followed the signs, and listened to the Deaf artists, it should be that way around ... this is important otherwise Deaf artists are running to the beat of the hearing people holding the power.

G. Access

(D) Access riders! Make sure to ask for them, or create one - know everyone's access needs - hardly anyone asks - and for touring too, not just rehearsals.

(A) A Deaf director needs an interpreter that they trust, that understands them and does a good job. Think about how to plan for access in the rehearsal room for people that don't sign. There are many different preferences out there so always consult with the Deaf directors about what they prefer first.

It's crucial to remember that bad interpreting can create a breakdown in communication, and creative relationships - so a good relationship with a good interpreter is crucial.

(C) Access to Work (AtW) can be very problematic. When I rehearsed and performed in AI's show, LIGHT, AtW were refusing to pay my interpreters and I owed them thousands of pounds - I didn't say it early enough. When AI realised, they worked with me to try and resolve it. My case - and many others - was a result of the government's Austerity Cuts and took years to resolve and ended up getting settled in court. But AtW can be another barrier on top of all the others, people don't realise this. It's hard to ask companies to cover the cost of interpreters - they expect AtW to cover it.

What we need to set up is a Deaf Arts Network that contacts AtW in BSL and establishes that as the norm. There's currently an uncomfortable power dynamic in which Deaf artists have to wait for AtW to 'approve' or 'permit' the provision of interpreters, which is part of a Deaf artist's human right to work, while an interpreter is "tapping your shoulder" for their fee.

(E) Access is both a necessity and an artistic barrier.

So many Deaf people go on about access...yes it is important but not as important as the story. Always focusing on access means less thought and effort goes into the quality of the play, the story, and all the other elements and so you end up with a lower quality show. With access you can't please everybody. The British Deaf Community likes to play it safe

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which means less criticism... I'm waiting for someone to refuse these rules, to say "f*@k you! I want to do it this way!"

With Deaf issues and theatre - we need to ask "Why isn't it working? Breaking through into the mainstream?" - and to observe other cultures, and where they do manage to break through...

(D) I once had an experience in a weeklong workshop with a Deaf-led company. It was mostly very good, interesting ...but also hard to know if I could speak or not? Everyone signed... so how do we consider that deafness is a multitude of experiences, not everyone can sign, for example?

H. Networking

(B) Developing people skills and networking can be tough - in the past I have had to do it without having an available interpreter - I had to find really innovative ways to approach this and overcome the barriers...

(A) Do the work to pull together a network and database of Deaf talent: people that you can then present to a Deaf director and say "here are some Deaf artists you might want to tap into" ... this will help take the pressure off the Deaf director having to find Deaf collaborators.

(C) This initiative could be a great way of developing a network of Deaf talent - Deaf-friendly or Deaf-led stage design; Deaf-led creative captioning; Deaf costume and lighting designers; music and sound developed in collaboration with Deaf artists and from their perspective. It could lead to a model which incorporates Deaf artists in every aspect of the theatre industry and their influence...and that would become a network which builds overtime.

All of the learning that comes out of this initiative can and should be shared.

I. Mental health and emotional needs

(C) We need to remember that Deaf actors, directors and artists often don't live where they work - if there is something challenging happening at work - who can I go to? If I finish performing and I'm in an area I don't know, I often find myself walking around in the dark at night, I can't hear, and I feel unsafe - this needs to be considered. Being away from home for a long time, not knowing anyone in a new area, for example with a 3-month job, if you're working with a hearing company - it can be too long to feel isolated. I have refused work like this based on mental health concerns.

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If you work in a hearing cast as the only Deaf performer or artist, facing that everyday is really hard...the difficulty is accumulative and takes its toll on your mental health, and usually as well as doing your job you're asked to be 'The Deaf Awareness Expert' or 'Sign Language Educator' - you end up spending all your time teaching your colleagues - which is not in your job description! In breaks, hearing colleagues may ask me to teach them various things in Sign Language, for example, when I need to be having a break, or reading my script, or remembering my lines.

In a space like this it can end up feeling all give give give - there's no space for your creativity.

(D) I was part of a new project last year exploring mental health and well-being. The lead organisation spent 2.5 months talking, discussing all their ideas, barriers, thoughts, health and needs and built up connections and everyone's confidence. Then we worked together for one week after all this, very successfully - but it was only possible because of the 2.5 months...

This scheme could be a 2 way process - AI and the Associate Director learning from each other.

J. Britain vs. the USA and abroad

(E) I identify as a Deaf Brown man, so I've found myself at the intersection of these two different characteristics - no one thought that was interesting when I was starting out. I felt the glass ceiling in the UK and believe that institutional racism played a part in that. You know how some people think that Black people can run faster? People formed beliefs about me and stereotyped me because I'm a Brown man. The British Deaf Community can be a bit dog-eat-dog, I didn't get much support there. I moved between Birmingham and London when I started out, but I felt there was a lot of favouritism and nepotism within the community. It's already hard enough to forge a career if you're Deaf - a major part of that is language and communication barriers. Now I think a lot about who's in the room making decisions and who is not.

I found it very difficult to begin career-wise, facing rejection, and having no way into the industry - it was a real struggle. I started out as a comedian, an organisation supporting Deaf talent secured a grant to help me do my stand up, but it wasn't enough to sustain me and there were no training opportunities for me to build my skill set. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't get work in the UK.

(D) Deaf arts in the USA are strong. Could part of this scheme be an exchange programme? Part of building bridges between Deaf and hearing organisations and communities? These types of programmes and exchanges offer many exciting opportunities and possibilities -

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we can and should be taking inspiration from others around the world. Some of the UK's best Deaf talent went and worked or trained abroad.

(E) When I applied to the "Institute of American Comedy" in the USA I was accepted immediately. My uncle lives in New York so I had somewhere to stay. I flew out there and got involved in the comedy scene and Gotham Comedy Club and found it much easier to get work, make connections and build relationships. There was also an American Sign Language (ASL) slam poetry scene I got involved with. I built up my confidence, and when I came back to the UK felt boosted with all that behind me.

It's weird that I was born in the UK and faced so many barriers, but going over to a country where I wasn't a citizen opened so many doors for me... It was only on my return that doors started opening in the UK, and I was approached by a big theatre to create a show. Before I went to the USA, all the doors here in the UK were closed.

5. Trust

How we can begin building trust, and why it's so important if we want to work together to change the sector...

(C) It's naive not to expect mistrust at first, you have to slowly build trust. AI could play a role that builds bridges between Deaf and hearing organisations - that's great! The best approach would be little by little, otherwise you could risk losing the trust of your Deaf collaborators - you know, if you're trying to do everything people will start to wonder why... so, small steps. Like hiring a Deaf Associate Director, you can both bring your knowledge and networks to a project, and gradually you're building this role and you become a company people would trust.

(D) Get to know each other through discussion and conversation - do the groundwork, build trust, build bridges between the Deaf and hearing communities.

Conversations might revolve around asking: what is it that you want? How can we help you? Send us a video about your access needs. Tell us who you are and how you feel about this role. It's important for the whole team to watch the video, or interview, and to meet the Deaf director. We all need to become prepared and equipped.

It takes time: so plan for that.

(A) Deaf people don't trust Deaf expertise. The origin of this issue comes from a history of having knowledge and education withheld from Deaf people by hearing people. Traditionally Deaf people belonged to the parish of a church - the only place where a hearing person

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could sign - but this person, usually a priest or nun, for example, held all the knowledge about their local community - about jobs, money, contacts, what was going on...and they kept Deaf people on a need-to-know basis. As a result, Deaf people would often argue between themselves about what was happening - disbelieving one another until they would end up going to the hearing person in their parish and asking them for 'the answer' or 'truth'. So "Deaf people don't trust Deaf expertise" - this is something that needs to change.

(E) There is no real skill-sharing in the Deaf Community - how do we build trust? How do we communicate? How can we learn from each other? If you don't communicate you can't improve or advance. The Deaf Community needs to tackle attitudes to working collaboratively - people are worried about the ownership of ideas, afraid they'll lose say, or control in what they have created. Perhaps part of the issue is a lack of opportunity, and therefore more competition, which doesn't foster trust or collaboration.

It's rare to see Deaf theatre make waves beyond the Deaf community - but this is the responsibility of both the Deaf and hearing - for the Deaf to work on improving their skills etc, - and for the hearing to be less ignorant.

(C) How can AI be better at helping remove some of the barriers, at being an ally? If I think back about my journey working with AI so far...

With LIGHT - it was a real struggle at first, as the only Deaf artist in a hearing company I felt quite isolated in the beginning, and although it was not an oppressive experience there wasn't much Deaf Awareness at AI back in 2013. But I did really enjoy the creative process. By the end it was clear AI had learnt and listened to me about my needs and how they could better accommodate them.

Then with Extraordinary Wall of Silence - it was a good experience, and the company was now Deaf Aware. I felt comfortable to speak up, expressing my honest thoughts, and saying if something wasn't working. I also appreciated that it was possible to speak your mind and disagree - with the Co-Artistic Director of AI, for example - and be on a level and honest. When we were all trying to decide on a title for the play - there was disagreement and we couldn't reach a decision. AI invited me along with all the theatre partners to collaborate in a round table marketing group, and through that session we managed to find a title everyone could agree on. That was great, I felt empowered and had control.

(A) Extraordinary Wall of Silence was great as it was infused with Deaf collaboration and a genuine response to something very real. Why are a hearing company telling a Deaf story though? This has been done a lot in the past, but now Deaf creatives want to tell their own stories. It's crucial AI learns from every aspect of this experience going forward.

6. Collaboration and co-creation/design

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The need for a collaborative process in which Deaf and hearing colleagues co-create and design this role

(B) Co-designing has real merit because it includes peer learning and a deeper understanding of what the Deaf director(s) will need - have conversations with organisations like Deafinitely, Graeae or Unlimited: could each organisation take a director on? Or facilitate placements for a director? AI needs to be looking at the wider sector and at where there can be crossover. Ideally it would be a cohort of other organisations and partners on the journey with AI.

It's important to lay out the bones of it all: it's not about being great at everything. We need to create space to say what you can and cannot do; there'll be things we haven't thought about; what shall we invest in? Discuss it all in collaboration with the Deaf director.

(E) It could be good if there's a round table meeting, followed by action: room for open discussion and reflection - a bit like Improbables D&D, Deaf people don't have anything like this - there's no space for this kind of dialogue. Who takes responsibility for this? Will people learn from these kinds of processes?

7. Training, mentoring and experience

We all need opportunities to learn, get experience on the job, have mentors who can guide us, and constructive feedback to help us progress

(A) We could create a theme for Deaf directors to respond to - a provocation for them to think about, to generate new ideas, so they don't just 'work with what they know' or play it safe. How can AI operate a bit like a co-op? You can offer mentoring, producing support, workshop training and opportunities for gaining more experience - offer expertise and consultation, touch base with the Deaf directors regularly so they feel supported. Regular touch-base sessions also open a space for them to feel safe to ask questions, feel able to fail, able to learn and grow.

This space - away from the rehearsal room - is important. Directors do not want to undermine themselves or be undermined in front of their creative team.

(C) There are three needs for Deaf directors in my opinion: 1. More training, 2. More experience, and 3. More roles. There are some good examples of training and experience-building out there: Deafinitely Theatre established a HUB where I learnt a lot - it was great, without that I don't know what I would have done.

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(B) There have been some Deaf Sign Language User Creative Assistants with Ramps on the Moon but they now need their own projects in those theatres. With support.

(D) Could AI add more mentoring to this scheme? So we work with someone who has potential, that we mentor, but also, there's a Deaf mentor working at AI too. You could work with someone who has worked with AI before, for example? They could mentor, help AI to talent-spot, and play a pivotal role in training and collaborating with AI to make key elements of the scheme happen.

Training is important, there's a confidence issue, so there needs to be experience in order to build confidence. Deaf-led training sessions are important and need to be part of the scheme. Speaking more specifically about Wales - where I am from and based - there's a lack of training, experience and confidence. We need to find a space, or create one, in which we feel comfortable. Could we offer a short course? Or even better, a one year apprenticeship to begin with? Offer shadowing opportunities before they need to direct themselves.

AI need to figure out what they are looking for: "emerging" artists, or established artists?

(E) Many Deaf artists need to learn to accept constructive feedback and critiques - we all need to learn and take feedback on board. Feedback is part of a standard creative process. Deaf artists can give it, but will they accept it in return?

If I think about AI in collaboration with Deaf directors and artists - these are the things you need to be aware of:

- The hearing industry is further ahead, I learnt a lot of skills from hearing peers - a big problem in the performance Sign Language Community is the quality of the work - we need to think about the quality of Deaf theatre.
- It's important to think about context - if you're telling a story in collaboration, think about "how"? Remember that there is a difference between how theatre is made in the Sign Language Community versus how it is made in the hearing world: just replacing Deaf / hearing people like for like doesn't work.
- How can we learn from each other? If you don't communicate you can't improve or advance. The Deaf Sign Language Community needs to tackle attitudes to working collaboratively.

(B) What are the training models we can share? Learning - access and access costs - could ITC create a bespoke financial model?

When I taught in RADA the students did not recognise the discipline or culture of Deaf work... If you develop this scheme - let the drama schools know! There's loads of work to do

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in drama schools: get Deaf directors to direct drama school shows - it's such a great way to cut your teeth (I'm not saying this is something "less", there's loads of pressure as it's important for the students). Drama training is still too rooted in 'the text' - it needs more freedom to be physical and emotional and open to different ways and cultures of making theatre if it's to be open for everyone. I recommend working with RCS in Glasgow - we can learn loads from them, find talent, and directors.

And supervision is important. Set targets for learning, for example: 1. Company 2. Individual 3. Sector and 4. Collective. And then they can report against those targets during their time.

Start with one person (don't spread it thinly across many) across a long period of time, not a one-off flash in the pan opportunity (with a get out clause in case it's really not working with that specific individual!) When I started at my company Jo Verrent told me that I'd spend my first three years as follows: 1. Asking "WHAT??" 2. Knowing 'what' and 3. Enjoying 'what'. It takes time.

Part of the Deaf directors commitment could or should be to keep a vlog (with a publishing deal!) it could be brilliant, and they can record and archive their experience to look back on but also for other people - especially young Deaf artists - to learn from.

8. Showcasing, R&Ds, production

Ideas need to be tested in safe spaces, mistakes - a crucial part of our development as artists - need to be celebrated, and pathways must be created to initiate self-learning

(A) My company collaborated with BAC to produce a Scratch Night for Deaf and Hard of Hearing theatre makers and artists to showcase their new work. For this event there was a lighting designer, captioner, producer and various other people available for the showcasing artists to work with however they wished. The artists and directors could use this team in their creation in a space that was safe for learning, growing and making mistakes.

Having these opportunities is very important - especially if you're in the process of making a new production and need to test ideas. It can be a space without fear from anyone - and it's not tokenistic - it's just offering a space, roles. It's also a great way of finding out who is out there. Feedback from showcases can help inform your process too, what might be needed for a Letter of Agreement, and it can create a relationship of trust.

(B) What AI's Deaf director will need is loads of small opportunities to direct 'bite size' R&D's and showcases, and to shadow other peoples R&D's or directing processes too, to see how others do it first.

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Create pathways for them to initiate their own learning.

9. Artistic Practice as well as Essential Artistic Director Skills

Finding ways to let artistic practice flourish and for directors to tell the stories they want to tell is vital. But it's not just about the art, this position should cover the managerial, administrative and strategic parts of the role too

(C) Deaf companies and artists are under pressure to tell Deaf stories - but it's important for us to also create work that's not about deafness - to show that Deaf artists can do other things too.

When creating the role it's a good idea to combine a number of responsibilities and deliverables into the role description to ensure it's not passive, and it's clear how the Deaf director can intervene, contribute, and collaborate.

(B) It needs to be acknowledged that "Directing" is a small part of what we do as directors, and making sure that this position covers the managerial, administrative and strategic areas of such a role - in a company or in a building. This appointment needs to equip Deaf directors with a strong skill set. I wish I'd had this experience...I remember a 6 week opportunity I was given once... but the rest had to be learnt on the job at my company!

The job should be a mix of 'running a company' experience, and 'directing your own production' experience. There need to be blocks of time where you do things like looking at budgets - it was a real fear of mine, one I still deal with.

So many artists want it all on a plate, but the truth is you need to work f*@king hard!

Have a really clear through-line of learning, mentoring and support - and find money for them to have their own projects, it's the right thing to do. The role needs to be about equipping someone to be bold, savvy, resilient and confident in their skills and ability - the only way to impact the sector is having more Deaf people in positions of power: that's what we need.

It's the small companies that have the biggest impact - big theatres take all the credit!

10. Funding, Resources and Partners

We need to find adequate funding and provide excellent resources (people, space, money, networks) to make this role a success; working in partnership and having Deaf

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partners on this scheme is really important

(D) Arts Council Wales have a new fund for organisations to create training opportunities, they created a manifesto too. It's a two year programme and was originally an idea of mine taken on by Arts Council Wales - why don't Arts Council England (ACE) do it too? Again - it's about breaking the cycle - and making change.

I would love AI to have Deaf partners on this scheme; for it to be a 3-5 year programme; AI should be at the forefront of how to do this, but also I would love there to be a collaboration between Wales and my network, AI, and other partners.

(B) To fund this scheme you could approach RTYDS, meet with them and ask if this is something they would be interested in funding, get on their radar...?

Arts Council England (ACE) is still hard to access for Deaf artists and creatives: video applications are being assessed by hearing people via an interpreter... It really needs to be Deaf people on those panels - they know who can and cannot sign, and are able to make a proper judgement on an application. But ACE is really up for creative opportunities to develop Deaf talent.

Other ideas you could consider:

- Talk to SYNC (off-shoot of Clore)
- Talk to ITC about models
- Tell a theatre to help AI by funding or fundraising for an R&D for the Deaf director - get partners to properly invest!
- I'm always happy to mentor - I love doing it
- Share the report with drama schools! Rose Bruford, BOVTS, RADA, more!
- Share it with Arts Council England
- Create a meaningful three year training, mentoring and development scheme for a Deaf director.

(A) You need a 'pot' your Deaf directors can dip into - not just money, but resources too, advice, assistance, space, networks, etc. It could be helpful to create a Letter of Agreement to know what people / roles there are within a production: dramaturg / writer / choreographer - this way people know their roles, but also know what is and isn't available to them.

(C) A key thing: who's in your team? A good mix of Deaf and hearing people in a company or project is best so that the Deaf director isn't isolated - could be Deaf stage managers, actors, designers and so on. It makes you feel safer if there are already Deaf people there.

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11. Bespoke?

There is no 'one size fits all' - this role needs to be tailor made to a specific director

(D) Yes! This is very important. One applicant may speak, another will sign, others lip read while some don't - it has to be bespoke because you cannot lump Deaf people together - every Deaf person experiences their deafness differently.

(A) Really we should look at creating a tailor made contract for the Deaf director we work with: if from the start we make it clear, for example, that "we're here as a supporting body, we can provide A, B and C, here are the constraints - what do you need?" - clarity and transparency are really appreciated. Start small, bravely, boldly, practically - to see who's out there; what's the vision? Invite Deaf directors to work alongside AI, and others - at the same time as developing their own practice - and give space and time to address their questions.

(B) This should be a bespoke scheme tailored to the Deaf director.

12. Conclusion

AI can do a lot as a grassroots company - but it's clear AI cannot do this alone. There will need to be partners, dedicated funders, and Deaf and hearing collaboration between artists, companies and theatres in place: a fully invested cohort all committed to long term, sector-wide change.

While this work has already proved itself to be essential in informing how we might move forward, as well as being a valuable learning experience for me and AI's team, AI and the consultants hope that this report will also serve as a document which can be shared with the wider arts sector in the near future.

It's common for reports to end by making recommendations, this report won't do that. Collaboration is key to everything we do at AI - this research is no different, so it feels crucial that this journey is collaborative too. But we do want to acknowledge that this is just the first step, and that at every stage of the process we will use a collaborative approach in order to move forward. We will be working with our colleagues, Deaf and hearing, to draw up recommendations, and to decide on the next steps, together.

George Mann - Co-Artistic Director, Ad Infinitum, November 2022.

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13. Appendix (i): The Brief

A Bit of History...

Ad Infinitum (AI) have worked and collaborated with Deaf artists, academics and leaders since 2012. Through an R&D examining Disability Hate Crime the company met Matthew (Matty) Gurney. We invited Matty to collaborate on LIGHT (an AI production that premiered in 2014), because we formed a natural creative chemistry and shared a love for working physically. Working with Deaf artists has influenced AI and our practice ever since and we continue to learn about how best to collaborate, about Deaf Awareness, access and working with interpreters, learning BSL, working with consultants, as well as meeting and collaborating with more Deaf leaders and artists such as Dr Paddy Ladd, Moira McAuslen, Nadia Nadarajah, David Ellington, Lynn Stewart-Taylor, Paula Garfield (Deafinitely Theatre) and Jenny Sealey (Graeae Theatre). We now, as a matter of principle and artistic policy, ensure all our shows have BSL integrated and captioned versions made with and for Deaf artists/audiences to attempt to broaden the accessibility of our work. And in the next 2 years we will work with a Deaf consultant to recruit a new Deaf Trustee to our board. It's an ongoing process of shared learning.

Deaf Directors

In 2018 our co-artistic director George Mann was invited to lead a day's workshop for a group of Deaf directors on a week-long 'Deaf Directing Course'. That day was both exciting - in that he got to work with some of the best Deaf talent in the UK - and sobering: the group expressed frustration about the content of the course, and no Deaf participant had been consulted about how to design such a course. While the intentions of the hosts were no doubt good, and the opportunity to meet with workshop leaders was exciting, the needs of the group had not been properly considered, and so the course left them feeling disappointed and/or cynical about their prospects in an industry that still marginalises Deaf talent - and does little to foster Deaf Directors.

We know from conversations we have had with our Deaf colleagues and others we have met over the last 9 years that there are a lot of Deaf directors who feel frustrated with the UK theatre sector. There don't seem to be enough jobs for Deaf Directors (aside from a minority who lead their own companies) and Deaf Directors don't have the same equality of opportunity as their hearing peers.

The opportunities that do exist, such as the workshop described above, tend to push Deaf artists into directing 'a play', usually written in English, and there is little (if any) opportunity to approach directing in a way that embraces, harnesses or indeed celebrates BSL and/or Deaf culture. Ultimately, because Deaf artists are usually not consulted, any available opportunities fall short of meeting their needs.

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We have also learnt that there are multiple barriers to getting self-made projects off the ground, including applying to ACE for funding, a general lack of Deaf Awareness within the industry and society at large, issues around Access to Work, lack of inclusivity and representation at the highest levels of the sector, and much more. And it's fair to say that when AI has collaborated with Deaf artists to make work that incorporates Deaf culture and Sign Language, we too have felt that there are multiple barriers we have to try and overcome. So what can we do?

The Idea

In 2020 AI were awarded Elevate funding from Arts Council England. As an ethnic minority, LGBTQ+, working class-led organisation we were being funded to take a two year journey (extended to three years due to the pandemic) that would enable our organisation to be more resilient and sustainable for the long term. And as part of that journey, our intention was to design a Associate Director Scheme for Deaf directors, but we're keen to sense-check if that is the best mechanism for achieving better opportunities for Deaf directors and if so, how it should be developed.

The proposal is to design, find funding for, and then recruit an Associate Director position at AI for a Deaf director. Fundamental to this is designing the role in consultation and collaboration with Deaf artists and directors working in the UK today so that the resulting position responds to the needs of Deaf directors and isn't created solely by a team without the necessary lived experience.

Consultation

We want to pay 5 participants to bring their thoughts, ideas and responses to this proposal by answering and engaging with the following questions:

1. Would you agree with the description above about the issues facing Deaf directors in the UK? And if so, what could AI do in collaboration with Deaf directors to raise awareness about this, and address the issue in practice: for example, could we collaboratively design and fund an Associate Director position at AI? Something else?
2. If yes, and you think an Associate Director position at AI is a good idea, how could we co-design such a scheme? Could/should this be co-designed by a paid cohort of Deaf directors/theatre makers with AI so that the resulting scheme meets the demands of Deaf directors?
3. Should this scheme be Deaf-led, or co-lead by Deaf and hearing artists at AI?
4. What are the barriers we need to break down? Both at AI, and in the industry and sector at large? Barriers to funding, opportunity, gatekeepers, contacts and networks,

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insider-knowledge? If the sector was perfectly set up for Deaf directors, what would that look like?

Results

Following these paid consultation sessions, we would compile the responses in a report we can share with the participants, Deaf consultants, AI, our venue partners, the Arts Council, and the wider community/sector.

We feel it's crucial that we remain open to multiple outcomes that could range from:

1. Yes, go for it! In which case we get on with collaboratively designing the scheme.
2. It's complicated, you need to partner with A, B and C, and it must be co-lead or Deaf-led, so we begin to figure out how we enter into a process in this way.
3. It's great you recognise the issue but it's not your place to address it, you can be an ally in these ways though...
4. Other responses we can't yet anticipate...

Based on what we learn, we can decide on next steps. We hope you'll be happy to join us on this journey!

Thanks

Team AI