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The Story of Graeae

According to Greek legend, the Graeae were three sisters, Pemphredo, Deino and Enyo, whose survival depended on a shared eye and a single tooth. Perseus steals these precious organs leaving them blind and toothless and will only return them in exchange for the secret of how to kill the Medusa. The three sisters give Perseus the knowledge he requires, but he breaks his oath and throws away their life source, leaving them in darkness, screaming and defenceless

Writing in *Disability, Theatre and Education* in 1982, Richard Tomlinson and Nabil Shaban the founders of the company, said 'The story (of the Graeae) appealed to us both and we were happy to concoct morals on the subject of disabled people helping each other or of never letting non disabled people pinch your eye from you. But the real reason why the name was chosen was because we both liked it.'

Graeae was the first professional theatre company of disabled people and has paved the way for others both nationally and internationally. In 1972 Nabil Shaban and Richard Tomlinson met at college in Coventry and they started work on theatrical productions involving disabled people. Eventually, in 1979, they offered their services to an International Rehabilitation Congress in Canada and were invited to perform their work there. By May 1980, a company of disabled performers had been established, and a new play created. *Sideshow* was a great success in Winnipeg and Illinois before becoming Graeae's first production.

Graeae has grown and evolved considerably since those early days and moved from project funding to revenue funding. The support from Arts Council England (ACE) and a range of other funders has meant we are able pay our actors, writers and designers good wages, have good production values and be in a position to continue to explore artistic accessibility, take new risks and work to ensure a continuing place within the theatrical climate both nationally and internationally.

Graeae's Vision

Graeae's artistic vision exploits the ambition the company has for its staff, artists and creative partners.

We have a commitment to create a new dramatic language that demolishes the barriers to the performance and appreciation of theatre.

The vision comprises four key elements:

- **World-class theatre** - creating and touring high quality, high impact theatre with a diversity of plays written by disabled and non disabled writers to enable us to cover the broad spectrum of theatre and the language of performance.
- **Education-** using a diversity of education models to act as a catalyst to inspire the creativity of a new generation of theatre makers
- **Training-** comprehensive performance/writing/technical training opportunities to inform a lasting legacy of Deaf and disabled people as a body of talent to be employed across the creative industry.
- **Championing accessibility** – aesthetic explorations of access to inform theatre as a whole experience for both creators and audiences.

Graeae's artistic plans are always informed by the company's mission to promote excellence and achieve equality of opportunity for disabled people working in all aspects of professional theatre.

The company's understanding of 'accessible diversity', 'cultural diversity', 'emotional diversity' and diversity of theatrical style inform and permeate every aspect of the artistic plan and the company ethos.

I have been with Graeae for 12 years and over that time we have we developed

- a whole new language around artistic access and aesthetics
- training 49 deaf and disabled artist in performance in a specialist accredited actor training course taught by leading professionals across the creative industry
- set up courses, initiatives and platforms to support disabled writers working with Paines Plough, Young Vic, Writernet and BBC radio
- ongoing relationships with major companies which include Paines Plough, Theatre Royal Stratford, RSC, Soho Theatre
- new street arts programme
- a new home

Graeae now finds itself heralded as a pioneering company which is hard to 'pigeon hole' because of the wide diversity of styles and practices its work encompasses. This is our strength as well as our weakness.

Our programme aims to create the right balance of extant plays which place disabled people into an existing narrative and new commissions that address issues about disability.

Peeling and new play by disabled writer Kaite O'Reilly featured the lives of three disabled characters.

'... a fascinating fusion of styles... The most impressive thing about Jenny Sealey's production is her cast, who put themselves on the line for the audience as much as they do for each other... The unravelling of their spiritual selves... reveals a tragic universal condition'

Patrick Marmion, London Evening Standard, 5.4.02

Not everybody liked the play!

It is presented by the Graeae Theatre Company, whose performers are all handicapped, and the actresses in Peeling share their characters' disabilities. Beaty (Lisa Hammond) is four feet tall; Coral (Sophie Partridge) has tiny limbs and a torso about the same size as her head; Alfa (Caroline Parker) is deaf.

Whatever value Peeling may have for audiences of disabled people is not for me to say. But, as a critic for a general audience, I did not find it engaging. Peeling is not so much a play as a vehicle for presenting the feelings of handicapped people and discussing their place in society. Rhona Koneig Rhoda Koenig. Independent 9.05.02

We are wrote a response to the review.

'This is the tenth press review we have received in the past week, and incidentally the first bad one. However, our response is not borne out of sour grapes, since over the years critics have found it difficult to be negative about the work of Graeae for fear of upsetting 'right on' sensibilities around disability. We have always joked how refreshing a poor review would be, as it would suggest implicit acceptance that our artistic endeavours were finally uppermost in all considerations. Criticism based of artistic merit – as with all other companies - is preferable to the malevolent pre-disposition to 'pat us on the back'. We have produced one or two turkeys in our time, and fully deserve to be lambasted for these efforts.

However, when the liberal broadsheets use, at best, sloppy reporting, and at worse, highly offensive language that perpetuates all the worst excesses of daily ignorance, it is time to reply. Rhoda Koenig argues that she cannot judge what might be the value of the show to a disabled audience. Who is she reviewing for? Presumably, solely the 'usual suspects'; a middle-class non-disabled audience, rather than the cultural cross-section the Independent apparently seeks to cater for. If this is the case, perhaps there could be an adjacent review catering for the 'handicapped people' (her words, not mine). Taken to its logical conclusion it would suggest that Rhoda Koenig can only review for Rhoda Koenig.

Unfortunately, this is not the case, and our performers have been subject to crass, ignorant and untrue assertions on their peripheral role in society and physicality: one apparently has 'tiny limbs and a torso about the same size has her head' - factually inaccurate and hideously offensive. Of course reviewers may want to make relevant reference to the actors' physicality, but using language that does not offend nor detract from the value of the criticisms is surely in everyone's interest.

On the first day of the new-look Independent espousing 'a broader view' such journalism merely perpetuates tired old stereotypes. A bad review is fair enough, but is it really too much to expect those writing professionally in your normally thoughtful paper to pay some regard to the power of the language they choose?

The letter drew some interesting responses especially from the black arts community in that critics don't like it when they do plays about black issues and if they don't do play about black issue why aren't they. What they also acknowledged was the need to ensure that all of us never stop being political and placing controversial issues into the public domain as our stories needed to be heard. They too understood the importance of having an all black cast for Miss Julie or Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Following this advice Graeae cast an all disabled cast for Blasted in 2005 which sold out at Soho Theatre in London.

Blasted presented a unique opportunity use every word Sarah Kane wrote from script to stage directions. We are given complete artistic licence from Kane's estate for the actors to verbalise the actions they were doing or to describe the set. This created the landscape of audio description alongside an intense soundscape developed by sound designer and my co director who is blind.

The press really understood the conceit and the multiple layers the casting gave to the text.

One of the many virtues of this excellent, brilliantly cast production by disabled-led company Graeae is that it manages to be at once shocking and coolly ironic... Go and see it, but don't expect an easy time." Robert Shore, Metro London

"Jenny Sealey's production for Graeae goes to immense, creative and sometimes thrilling lengths to make itself legible to people with impaired vision and hearing... the power of the experience is undeniable." Joyce Mcmillan, The Scotsman

"Graeae seem a match made for Blasted, more than equal to the task of interpretation with subtle crafting... This is an astounding piece of theatre." Carole Baldock, The Stage

After doing our next extant play, Bent by Martin Sherman, Birmingham Rep Theatre approached us to co produce Whiter than Snow by Mike Kenny for young people age 11 plus. This was a re telling of the Snow White story from the perspective of people of short stature. The play set in the landscape of war and science and uses references of Mengele's experimentation on disabled people and the eradication of disabled people during the holocaust. The cast was all disabled with three actors being of short stature. There was a sign language interpreter as a character in the play part of the cast and audio description through a story telling narrative meant that young blind children did not have to use audio description headsets and feel separate from the audience. The work

provided a positive role models of disability for young disabled and non disabled people and placed disability into a historical context which is part of our heritage

“Witty and hugely entertaining, performed with a wonderfully light, confident air - and raises cogent social and ethical sore points without preaching or whingeing. That's Graeae for you: the UK's foremost disabled-led company tends not to do guilt trips - just exceptional, thought-provoking theatre with universal appeal.”

Mary Brennan, The Herald

New writing is the life blood of Graeae. We have been running new writing schemes in collaboration with writernet, BBC Radio, Paines Plough and Royal Court Young People writers group.

We commission both disabled and non disabled writers. Over the last 12 years we have commissioned 10 new plays, 12 rehearsed readings as part of Display 4 with writernet and Paines Plough Wild Lunches which is a play a pint and a pint at the Young Vic. We have three more commissions in the pipeline – one is for a new writing venue, one is to go into schools and the third is a musical.

Graeae's Literary Manager does writer master classes for MA writing courses and writing departments exploring how the artistic access (signing and audio descriptive narrative) may be integrated into the writing.

The company has a solid history of supporting emerging artist and has recently received uplift from Arts Council England to enable us to explore wider performance platforms for disabled artists who skills lay in performance art, burlesque, solo performance, site specific and street arts. The potential of diversity of platforms increases the visibility of the disabled performer and provides the possibility for their work to be embedded independently within differing genres.

Street Arts became part of our remit when Greenwich and Docklands partnered us with Strange Fruit to develop a new working methodology. This has enabled us to place deaf and disabled people on sway poles and literally and metaphorically raise them above the precipice. The training and execution of a new work Against the Tide opened up a whole range of possibilities of how disabled performers can access the poles and create a whole new performance vocabulary. The partnership is a real exchange of skills, learning and rooted in artistic respect for the benefits of both companies.

Our second outdoor venture is the newly formed Rhinestone Rollers, eight electric wheelchair user ladies who give a whole new meaning to line dancing. They are working with Marc Brew and Caroline Bowditch on a new piece for this year's festival circuit.

The ability to create more work is now more possible than ever because after 30

years of nomadic existence we have moved into our own building. We no longer have to compromise on half accessible rehearsal spaces or unpleasant offices..

Our disabled focus group and Graeae staff worked with architects to design a Grade II listed building transforming it from its former use as a horse stable and tramshed for the old Hackney Omnibus into an urban, fully accessible space. It has been designed to be welcoming, creative and inspirational and an enjoyable place to work.

Arts Council England funded this 2.7 million pound building which has office space, breakout and networking areas, meeting rooms and the jewel in our crown - a state-of-the-art rehearsal space featuring fully accessible lighting rig and sound system.

ACE regard Graeae as a success story and their flagship company. It is an extraordinary place to work and with huge gratitude and thanks to the artistry and excellence of the people we work with, we now have a unique place in 21st C theatre landscape.

Jenny Sealey MBE March 2010