
Stage magic: empowering inclusion through art



The performing arts can play a pivotal role in combatting social exclusion, argues David Woodhead. He believes that it is vital to embrace these creative expressions to help build a more inclusive society.

When we use the phrase 'social inclusion' we are implying that there must be at least the possibility of exclusion. Why? Gender, race, social background, wealth, ability? These are all examples of issues of difference from a perceived norm.

So how can the performing arts make a difference? Perhaps the greatest value of the arts is that they have the power to make perceived differences feel less scary. If we have seen something in a safe environment such as art, perhaps encountering it in the real world then becomes less challenging.

At its core, social inclusion involves creating environments where every individual feels respected, valued, and has a sense of belonging. The performing arts offer such an environment. When we talk about performing arts, we are considering a wide range of artistic expressions, including theatre, dance, music and other live performances. Through their ability to engage, connect, and communicate, these means of expression play a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity. Many will be familiar with Chickenshed. This is an organisation that welcomes young people with diverse abilities and offers them the opportunity to actively participate in making theatre.

Arts and minds

Looking beyond involvement in theatre as an end in itself, the University of Sheffield runs the [Stand and Be Counted Theatre](#), an arts-based participatory action research partnership. This programme emerged from a three-year project researching the situation for migrant young people in the local population who had encountered difficult circumstances. It aims to understand the challenges they face and what builds social integration.

The [results](#) indicate that participation in the arts can lead to improved mental health, social skills and academic performance. The study also found that the arts can help to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

One fundamental aspect of the performing arts is their capacity to amplify marginalised voices and offer a platform for the expression of diverse perspectives. Within a play, a dance performance or a musical composition, narratives from different cultures, social backgrounds and identities are shared. These stories can shed light on experiences that might otherwise remain unheard, thereby fostering empathy and understanding among communities.

As an example, I would cite [Public – The Musical](#) produced by Stroud & Notes. This play is a musical about four very different people forced to spend time together when they unexpectedly become locked in a public toilet block. It is an unlikely and unexpected scenario in which to address themes relating to homophobia, toxic masculinity, privilege and mental health struggles. Yet its humour and wit serve to draw the audience in and help them understand the profound differences between the plays four characters.

Numerous scholarly articles (see [The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society](#) or [Arts and Health](#)) have delved into the impact of performing arts on social inclusion. These publications highlight the role of arts in empowering individuals, particularly those from marginalised or underrepresented groups, by providing a means of self-expression and social engagement.

Furthermore, interviews with artists, community organisers and participants in arts-based social initiatives provide valuable insights into the tangible benefits that can be delivered. They underline how participating in or witnessing these performances can build bridges between people from different backgrounds, fostering a sense of community and shared humanity.

An example is the [El Sistema](#) music education programme in Venezuela, which has been credited with helping to reduce crime and poverty in disadvantaged communities. The programme provides free music lessons to children and young people, and it has been shown to have a positive impact on their academic performance, social skills and self-esteem.

Arts and education

It is also essential to note the impact of performing arts in educational settings, both to inspire a sense of wonder and curiosity and to engage young people directly in developing artistic abilities. Incorporating the arts into school curricula not only nurtures creativity but also encourages understanding and appreciation for diverse perspectives. Research highlights the positive influence of arts education on students' social and emotional development.

For anyone interested in theatre and performing arts as a vehicle for education and social inclusion it is worth at looking at [Curious Directive](#). This small theatre company based in Norwich makes science-based theatre spanning a wide range of subjects from cryogenics to taste. Their creatives collaborate with scientists and theatre technicians to produce engaging multimedia theatre about these diverse subjects thereby bring together scientific and artistic audiences.



In practical terms, the performing arts, through their collaborative nature, encourage teamwork, communication and mutual respect among participants. Whether it's rehearsing for a play, choreographing a dance routine or composing music together, individuals learn to appreciate each other's contributions, regardless of their differences. These outcomes are all aligned with the [Building Capabilities](#) theme, which is part of the RSA's Design for Life mission.

The inclusive nature of the performing arts is also evident in the audience's experience. A live performance typically brings together individuals from various backgrounds, uniting them through a shared emotional and intellectual experience. Audience members become part of a collective journey, transcending differences and connecting through the emotions and ideas conveyed in the performance.

The performing arts therefore serve as a cornerstone in promoting social inclusion by offering a platform for diverse voices, fostering understanding, empathy and respect among communities. The profound impact of the performing arts on social inclusion is evident from the examples cited above and many others.

It is vital to embrace these creative expressions as a means to build a more inclusive society. This in turn creates the imperative to ensure that the arts are embedded in Design for Life and are well funded both by governmental and private backers.

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