Shift The Mindset: Arts Access for All Abilities: The 4 A’s – My tour of New Zealand (Aotearoa) revealed ways that the country leads the way in ways to advocate for and ensure that the creative process is a shared experience across many types of barriers. My time was a rich exchange of ways that we, my theater troupe of 20 years, has developed methods for creative collaboration; and for me to learn of other sweeping ways that a solid commitment shared by creative arts companies in New Zealand, on a national level, presents a valuable template on: “How To Create and Ensure Access to the Arts”. This is shared here, through a short outline and documents attached. See these as ways to imagine innovating within your company’s work and in the manner of outreach, ensuring that access to the arts reaches all people who experience barriers to participation or whose access is limited.

As we are in a time of confronting the assumptions made long ago of placing some people on a lower level of worth (Women- the “Me Too” movement/ People of color- the Black Lives Matter movement), it is high time to confront the ways that people who are labeled are held back from full participation in the way the arts are accessed, in training and presentation. Currently, there are some highly regarded series such as “Speechless” in which Micah Fowler is authentically a person with Cerebral Palsy; and “The Good Doctor” in which Freddie Highmore plays a surgeon on the Autism Spectrum. He is, however, NOT authentically playing from first hand experience. The recent film, “The Upside” with Brian Cranston, also is not played by a person who knows the experience of using a wheelchair. One conversation about this is found in this article: [https://metro.co.uk/2019/01/09/why-cast-bryan-cranston-as-a-quadriplegic-man-when-disabled-actors-are-queuing-up-for-roles-8326744/](https://metro.co.uk/2019/01/09/why-cast-bryan-cranston-as-a-quadriplegic-man-when-disabled-actors-are-queuing-up-for-roles-8326744/)

It is commonly stated that the actor has done a huge amount of research, etc. etc. What remains true is that studios and performing arts companies are not doing the research on who might be available to fill such a role. There may be actors who have great talent, and oh yes, the physical or mental disability experience to portray the character. In “Children of a Lesser God”, the playwright Mark Medoff states clearly that he required all of the roles representing people with hearing loss, to be played by the people for whom this is reality when it is produced professionally. Marlee Matlin came to the role when it was adapted to film and has had a strong career in roles since then not necessarily related to her deafness.

How To Create and Ensure Access to the Arts: (see each category in further detail in attached .pdf’s)

1. Commitment: The current field and the historical context -- While many efforts are being made to increase the presence of people with disability labels in the public eye, as in sitcoms, film, and performances, it is still lacking in a focus or solid commitment or mission to do so. It is first necessary to dispel preconceived notions of worth and value in terms of a variety of abilities and creative offerings. It is necessary to craft a good and inclusive Access Policy.
2. **Knowledge:** Increasing the knowledge base of WHO is available in the community and potential audience/performer population means that it may be necessary to do some research to understand inclusion and who is currently presenting and performing high levels of work in the arts. Learning what has been done or the cutting edge of what is possible allows groups to see excellence in the application of practices of inclusion.

3. **Leadership:** It is helpful to find examples of effective collaboration methods that honor each voice and creative impulse when working with diverse communities of people, whether they are people with “lived experience” of disability, mental health issues or have other barriers to full participation. By sharing the examples of dance and theater companies that successfully produce professional works and engage in collaborative methods effectively dispels the notion that increasing access means to provide ready-made templates for success or that the work has a lower production value.

4. **Inclusion and Partnerships:** By following the examples of successful practices of inclusion and integration, individual artists and companies may be assured of access to the venues necessary for presentation of their creative works. Partnerships with arts organizations and producers of performing arts are essential parts to ensure that access and performance values meet the needs of diverse populations of people. See details for developing Creative Spaces in attached .pdf of Art Access Aotearoa.

The DETAILS:

**How To Create and Ensure Access to the Arts** – the Details for exploring and finding the right ‘fit’ for each artist, company and organization are available on the attached .pdf’s. The documents in the .pdf’s are as follows:

- **Access Policy** - has several documents I gathered from organizations in New Zealand that have full commitments to inclusion and access for their programs. In this document, you’ll find ideas on how to proceed in writing your own access policy and the ‘do’s and don’ts’ about usage of language. It is very important to pay attention to language as you proceed in designing your approach to making your work accessible. There are so many more layers of what it means to say “accessible” than merely wheelchair access. Ticketing, seating, advertising to name a few. For more support you may contact me: ezzell2244@gmail.com

- **Museums** – with information of ways to create audio-described tours and access for different populations. There is one on how to present to a group on the Autism Spectrum and another on the ways to pre-inform a group (to create a sense of ease) coming to a large theater, on what to expect.

- **Dance** – is a series of documents produced by Arts Access Aotearoa on different companies to show the ways that they increase access to all abilities. Two other
notable companies in New Zealand are: **Touch Compass** in Auckland and **Jolt Dance Company** in Christchurch. **Touch Compass** has a long history of supporting inclusive ensemble performers and they have been noted for such through national awards. **Jolt Dance** has an additional commitment that I found especially noteworthy for this Shareback- they not only hold community wide classes to teach dance, but they teach their students that have been trained by them in these classes, to learn to be teachers. Once they complete a teacher training, they are placed in the local elementary schools to teach creative dance! I was able to spend an entire morning with them and watch as they took creative prompts and objects to design a possible lesson to teach in the coming semester. The students were varied in terms of ability to use language and were all very creative dancers. They are paired to go into the classroom so that if one has a lesser ability to be understood because of speech difficulties, the other can do that part. It was very exciting to see the commitment of this company and the leadership to provide a way for these dancers to do work that they love and receive pay for doing so.

- **Hearing Impaired**- The documents state clearly why and how to make productions accessible to people who have hearing loss. The ways for an interpreter to be artistically involved is also outlined. The sign language referred to here is “New Zealand Sign Language” but the principles are transferrable to “American Sign Language” or ASL.

- **Vision Impaired**- includes documents prepared by **Arts Access Aotearoa** and another one that was included from the ARTS Council England. It has a variety of great points that cover much more than just information for the visually impaired. I was fortunate to join an Audio-Described tour of various exhibits at **Te Papa** in Wellington that illuminated my understanding of why access to museums and other theater and arts presentations are necessary for inclusion for people with vision impairments. Finally, I hope that the artists and companies that explore this Shareback will feel free to contact me with any questions as to particulars or methods to begin to Shift the Mindset in your companies and communities. It is my passionate belief that nothing less than Brilliance resides in individuals who experience barriers to creative expression. It is for this reason that we must find the avenues to make Inclusion and Access a reality to further the field of the Arts.