

Dear Cultural Ministers,

Thank you for working to make the arts more accessible for those of us who are Deaf/deaf, have a disability or mental health condition. I am a professional Deaf artist who has been working in the field for 18 years. In this time I have experienced a significant amount of discrimination, and I have had to fight hard to become professional and overcome numerous frustrating barriers.

THE TYPE OF BARRIERS I HAVE FACED

Let me tell you about just some of the barriers I have experienced:

- As a young performing artist, I could not find a professional company that would take me on as they would also have to hire interpreters and this was prohibitively expensive.
- I decided to freelance and tried to get an agent. But no agent had confidence in me and I received no bookings.
- I invested my personal savings to pay a friend to call festivals and events and tell them about me. I posted them my promotional material and started to receive bookings. Once they had booked me once, repeat bookings were easy as they loved my work.
- I became a writer, had a book series published, and was invited to speak at writers' festivals. However, I had never done this type of speaking before and I wanted to go and watch some other authors speak, so I could get an idea of what types of things they said. I could not access any author talks as there were no interpreters. So I had to make up my talk 'blind', without knowing the context. To this day I do not know how my talk sits in the context of others' talks. I only know that I get repeat bookings.
- I went to a writers' festival and was invited to opening night networking and drinks. However, while the festival had hired an interpreter to interpret my presentation, there was no interpreter for the networking and drinks. I could not connect with others on the scene. I remain isolated as a writer.
- At one festival, a writer who I am absolutely in awe of was presenting. I begged the festival to provide interpreters for her talk. I was told they would not, because the previous year they had a budget for interpreting but no Deaf people came, so they scrapped that budget and it's not available this year. I thought to myself: maybe the Deaf people who didn't come are like me - I don't even look at programmes for writers' festivals because it's like looking at a candy bar full of lollies I am not allowed to eat. How would I know to look at that one festival's programme?
- I became a visual artist. I applied for a course in how to best sell art online. I emailed the teacher and asked if the course content was accessible. He said it was not. I asked if he could make it accessible. He said no. I asked if he would teach me privately. He said, 'This course is not suitable for you.' I sent him a long and persuasive list of my credits and experience and outlined exactly how I thought he could help me. He relented and gave my private sessions via type-Skype. He told me later I was among his best students.

- I applied for another course and they said it was not suitable for me. I was ill at the time and felt too tired to fight. I gave up on that one. I often give up. I have to pick my battles.
- I wanted to go to a film festival, but when I looked at the programme it didn't say which sessions had captions. I called up and asked. I could book for a session with three movies, one of which had subtitles but the other didn't. That would hardly be a fulfilling experience, so I didn't go.
- I wanted to go and see some shows at the Melbourne Fringe. But in past years the programme did not indicate which shows would be accessible to me and there was no central office I could call that would know which shows were suitable - I'd have to call up each show individually. I did not even get the programme nor look through it. Best to focus on things I CAN access.
- My family and friends love to go to the movies. So do I. But I cannot go with them because they like to see new popular movies, and I can only watch foreign films as they have subtitles. So they go and watch the movies and talk about them and I am left out. Then a few months later I watch it by myself on DVD. I want to talk about it with them but they have moved on or forgotten - they are talking about this week's movie.
- NDIS, since it was rolled out, now provides me with some funding that I could use to book interpreters for events and pay for course content to be transcribed. This has been amazing and life-changing for me. However, my current plan gives enough funding for one booking (max 2 hours) per week. I have to choose between using this for a medical appointment, a social event, a cultural event, a fitness or creative class, or access to something I want to learn online. For the other 166 hours each week I am still without access.

Please help make this easier for artists who come after me, and for the rest of my career as an artist and my life as a consumer/creator of the arts. In this email, I outline the key things the government can do to make a huge difference to accessibility in the arts.

BUILD ACCESS INTO CREATIVE PROJECTS FROM THE START

Access needs to be built into all artistic projects from conception. Just as funding bodies require artists to present a budget and a marketing plan, so should artists be required to develop an access plan in order to secure funding. This access plan must be funded by the government, so as not to inhibit artists' capacity to create. For example, arts courses, shows, movies, exhibitions etc should all be required to include captions, transcripts and visual information. Artists should be encouraged to think creatively about how to meet access requirements in an integrative and innovative way, rather than seeing access as something to lump on at the end of a project. Creators should ask the question: how will people who are deaf or have a disability or mental health condition access this? A guidebook needs to be made in consultation with Deaf/deaf consumers, those with all types of disabilities, and those with mental health conditions, that help artists and organisations understand how to provide access. Funding organisations need to fund this as a crucial part of the project.

Access needs to be incorporated at the promotional stage too, so that programmes routinely indicate the type of access provided/available to audiences. Booking systems need to be made accessible. For Deaf people, sometimes the barrier is small, such as that we are required by the computer system to enter a phone number but there is no box to check to indicate that that number is for text messages only, and sometimes the barrier is larger in that we are expected to make phone calls (cumbersome through the National Relay Service) or are required to book through a special organisation rather than through mainstream channels. People with other disabilities, such as those who are blind, face different barriers to booking. The guidebook needs to cover all aspects of creation, promotion and presentation of arts projects.

WE NEED ACCESS TO MOVIES

Movies are an intrinsic part of life for most Australians. Going to the movies is seen as a way to switch off at the end of a week, a way to ignite romance on a date, a way to get together socially with friends, and to celebrate the conclusion of a project or course of study. Discussion of new and popular movies is part of life. Deaf people are left out of this because most movies do not have open captions. There are so many barriers to the current Captiview system of providing access that it is useless. To provide true access, we need open captions to be displayed on all movies. Legislation needs to force this to happen, as cinemas are afraid that they will lose audiences if they do this under their own initiative. Legislation needs to require that movies can only be imported into Australia if open captions files are provided too. Australian made movies must be required to develop captions during the production stage, as part of the funding requirements. Australians will quickly become accustomed to watching movies with captions. In European countries where the main language is not English, almost all movies are shown with captions, and they still experience a strong audience in cinemas. Perhaps cinemas could offer special screenings for those who oppose the use of captions in less popular timeslots (think Tuesday mornings at 9am - which is currently when we generally get to access the movies if access is provided at all).

I have focused here on Deaf access, as that is my area, but naturally access needs to be provided on all levels, audio descriptions included.

ATTITUDES NEED TO CHANGE

Peoples' attitudes are a major obstacle. Art/creative teachers don't want to go the extra mile to make their courses accessible to me. Agents are reluctant to take me on. Festivals are reluctant to book me. Professionals are nervous about giving me commissions and residencies. They don't think it will be worthwhile, because they have never seen Deaf artists, performers and so on. This is a systemic problem, which creates barriers in the arts as well as in all aspects of society. In order to improve access to the arts, we need to change peoples' attitudes. There are few Deaf people in positions of power and authority because licensing boards don't accept us. It is a huge fight to become a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a pharmacist and so on. Some people win, and many lose or give up. With few of us in role-modelling positions, the public doesn't see us. They assume we are not in those positions because we lack the capacity to perform them effectively. This feeds into an assumption by the mainstream that we are stupid and incapable.

The government can address this firstly by placing new, stringent legislation in place that force organisations and licensing boards to stop discriminating. They can set up an organisation that we can contact when we experience discrimination, who will fight on our behalf to rectify this. Currently the legal system is inaccessible and ridiculously expensive. Fighting discrimination is impossible for most of us. The government should be doing this.

The government also needs to put in place initiatives to get Deaf people, people with a disability and people with a mental health condition into the top tiers of jobs in all professions, so that we can become role models and be seen in the public. When the public sees us in professional roles of authority, the stigma and fear surrounding us will be vastly diminished. They will come to respect us. This can mean extra support for education to help us achieve the knowledge and skills we need, as well as whatever support we need to fulfil the role given our limitations, and financial incentives for employers to take the risk in hiring us.

The government can create an awareness campaign, much like those we have had for drink driving and sun protection, to help people understand how to relate to us in an inclusive, respectful way. In Australia, even though many of us are not religious, we have a strong cultural understanding of the Ten Commandments as a kind of moral code that we are not to break. In Scandinavian countries, there is a similar cultural understanding known as Jante's Law.

The laws are:

- You're not to think you are anything special.
- You're not to think you are as good as we are.
- You're not to think you are smarter than we are.
- You're not to imagine yourself better than we are.
- You're not to think you know more than we do.
- You're not to think you are more important than we are.
- You're not to think you are good at anything.
- You're not to laugh at us.
- You're not to think anyone cares about you.
- You're not to think you can teach us anything.

When I go to these countries, I am treated with respect and not discriminated against to the extent that I am here in Australia. I believe it has to do with the cultural foundation that was built on these laws. People who believe in Jante's Law cannot look at a person who is Deaf or has a disability and assume they know more than us, are smarter than us, nor are better than us at anything. Instead, people relate to me as though I am more skilled and knowledgeable than them, just as they do with everyone in their culture. I mention this because cultural understanding and awareness is critical to how we are related to and treated. I don't believe Australia should adopt Jante's Law. But I do believe that a strong awareness campaign that promotes respect for the skills, knowledge and insight that people who are Deaf or have a disability can bring to our community would make a huge difference.

Much of the stigma I face from individuals and organisations that deny me access is due to a lack of awareness, fear and uncertainty. By providing an awareness campaign about what it means to be Deaf/deaf and how people should relate to us and include us would be very helpful. Obviously this is needed for those with other disabilities and mental health conditions too.

WHY I NEED ACCESS TO THE ARTS

The art is *the* most important part of my life. It brings me great pleasure and keeps me sane, as well as earning me an income. I am a voracious reader and always have a book on the go, and have written numerous books myself. How I wish I could access networks of authors. All types of craft - knitting, sewing, art journaling, drawing, painting, mosaicing, sculpting and jewellery making (to name just a few) are activities I do for fun. Spending time making things with my hand brings me peace and calmness in a way that nothing else can. Learning the skills to do these are crucial to my enjoyment, as is accessing and becoming inspired by creations made by others. Dancing and circus skills keep me fit and healthy and again I love to participate in classes for these. When I go more than a week without being creative, I feel depressed and life does not feel worth living. I know that I need to be proactive in staying creative, for my mental health.

Many thanks for considering us and being prepared to make a change. I am happy to be contacted to help make a difference in terms of designing suitable campaigns and law changes and an access handbook for artists.

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Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Asphyxia". The script is fluid and cursive, with the 'A' starting with a large loop and the 'y' having a long, sweeping tail.

Asphyxia

www.asphyxia.com.au