

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Excellence and Innovation in Arts Access

MIXED BLOOD THEATRE COMPANY

Minneapolis, MN

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Take Note

- The company engages artists with disabilities to develop and produce projects by, for and about people with disabilities, provides services that make programs accessible for all and illuminates for the general public issues facing those with disabilities.
- Instead of traditional open captioning, the company adapts scripts into a PowerPoint presentation with one-two lines per screen, and projects the images either above the stage or to monitors in the theater.

Overview

The Mixed Blood Theatre Company is a professional, multi-racial theatre promoting cultural pluralism and individual equality through artistic excellence. Using theater as a vehicle for artistry,

entertainment, education and social change, Mixed Blood Theatre addresses artificial barriers that keep people from succeeding in American society. Mixed Blood's purpose is to:

- Produce plays using culture-conscious casting
- Provide the finest forum in the nation for theatre artists of color to practice their craft
- Take artistic risks in the selection and production of plays
- Reach a non-traditional theatre audience
- Produce educational programs on racial and cultural themes

Presenting in a 200-seat theatre in an 1887 firehouse, Mixed Blood has an annual budget of approximately \$1.3 million and annual attendance of approximately 115,000. The company presents over 500 performances annually in its theatre, schools, churches, community centers, juvenile detention centers and workplaces.

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

Thanks to a new staff member who was involved with the [PACER Center](#), Mixed Blood staff realized in 2000 that they needed to expand their interpretation of their mission. Disability is an “artificial barrier that keeps people from succeeding in American society.”

In addition to the mission statement, the company specifically invites artists with disabilities to audition.

Professional Development

Just as access and inclusion are embedded in the company's mission, access and inclusion are part of all staff training workshops.

Leadership in the Community

Mixed Blood is a leader in the community because of its art. The company produces works by artists with disabilities, featuring artists with disabilities and about disability issues. Some of these are world premieres such as Ken LaZebnik's *Vestibular Sense*, which won a best emerging playwright award from the American Theatre Critics Association. In partnership with [Interact Theatre](#), Mixed Blood also staged the first production of *The Boys Next Door* to feature actors with disabilities.

In 2005, the company received the [VSA arts Minnesota](#) Access Award.

Effective Practices

Community Engagement

Mixed Blood is committed to programming by, with and for people with disabilities. Engaging people with diverse disabilities on stage, behind the scenes and in the audience, and investing the necessary time, energy and resources into the effort, has fostered a deeper relationship and level of trust with various communities than would be possible if the company had only pursued audience accessibility. Administrative and artistic staff have also learned much more about how to collaborate with and accommodate diverse individuals as a result of “walking the walk.”

The theater’s mainstage productions target specific and different populations from one show to the next through building relationships with communities around each production and sustaining connections with those communities between targeted productions. This technique is about creating as much as finding audiences, and has been an effective means for generating audience members with various disabilities; for example, months before the production of *Vestibular Sense*, theater staff met with the staff of the [Fraser Institute](#) and gave them the script. In addition, they

- convened a group of parents of children with autism and an occupational therapist to discuss the project with the artists;
- contacted therapists and organizations that work with people with autism;
- attended [ARC of Minnesota’s](#) conference in Rochester, Minnesota, to promote the production statewide; and
- provided free preview tickets for autism information and parent network groups.

Mixed Blood also co-produces some shows with [Interact Center’s](#) theater company—a group comprised primarily of artists with disabilities. This partnership not only benefits the community, but it also provides Mixed Blood with access to quality actors and scripts that explore disability issues. Other partners include [VSA arts Minnesota](#) and [Global Deaf Connection](#).

Implementation

Mixed Blood is completely accessible for audience members and artists with disabilities. In addition to the aforementioned basics, services include:

- Stage access via ramps.
- Captioning provided through a PowerPoint presentation. One-two lines per screen are projected either above the stage or to monitors in the theatre. This has proved to be more cost effective than certified real-time captioning services and the necessary equipment.
- Seating in the lobby.
- Enhanced outdoor lighting.
- Publicized run times for those making transport arrangements.

The company engages artists with disabilities to develop and produce projects by, for, and about people with disabilities including

The History of Bowling playwright Mike Ervin, who is a quadriplegic, about physical, mental and acquired disabilities, featuring an actor who is a quadriplegic;

The Boys Next Door, co-produced with [Interact Center](#), about a group home for adults with developmental disabilities, featuring a cast of people with Down syndrome, mental illness, brain injury and physical disabilities;

The Deaf Duckling by Aditi Kapil and Nicole Zapko, an artist who is deaf, about a woman who is deaf born into a hearing family, featuring ASL-fluent and actors who are deaf;

Sweet Nothing In My Ear about cochlear implants, featuring renowned actress Terrylene, who is deaf; and

Vestibular Sense by Ken LaZebnick about a high-functioning young man who has autism, featuring an actor with autism.

Evaluation

Mixed Blood obtains direct feedback on its access services from audience members and artists who complete evaluation forms. The company measures success in achieving objectives against annual goals and long-range plans, and assesses how well staff promote access programs and services.

The company's innovative use of PowerPoint to provide captioning resulted from input from community members who are deaf. They educated staff on the extent to which

- people who are deaf are fluent in ASL (not everyone);
- people who use hearing aids and assisted listening devices are able to clearly understand speech (not always); and
- people who lip read can see artists' lips given theatrical lighting (it depends).

Challenges

- Finding quality works about disability issues or promising playwrights to nurture.
- Locating excellent actors or performers with disabilities.

Advice

- Consider people who are deaf as part of a culture and not people who have a disability.
- Do not assume that there is a single disability community.
- Make the commitment; do the work; and learn along the way.
- Visit and learn from performing arts organizations in your discipline that are primarily focused on presenting disability issues and working with artists with disabilities such as [Deaf West](#) and the [National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped](#).



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