



West Yorkshire Playhouse Guide to

Dementia Friendly Performances



Welcome to our Dementia Friendly Performances Guide.

West Yorkshire Playhouse is proud to have been recognised with two major national awards for this pioneering work:



Best Dementia Friendly Project 2015



Outstanding Innovation in Dementia Care 2015



This guide was published in May 2016. Author Nicky Taylor

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David Cutler, Director, The Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation will be funding work with arts and older people throughout this decade. It has been one of the most exciting areas we have ever supported and it is exhilarating to see how the field is developing so quickly through the leadership of inspirational organisations like West Yorkshire Playhouse. We are delighted to fund this important guide.

In 2015 we worked with colleagues on a publication by The Alzheimer's Society called *Becoming a Dementia Friendly Arts Venue – A Practical Guide*. This new publication goes into much greater depth to give a comprehensive account of what is entailed in a dementia friendly performance. I am sure this new guide will be the encouragement that other venues need to take the next step in bringing the joy of the arts into many more people's lives.

"I was struck by how much time, thought and love had gone into the dementia friendly performance of Beryl."



James Brining, Artistic Director, and Robin Hawkes, Executive Director, West Yorkshire Playhouse

It might be considered something of a cliché to talk about theatrical experiences being life-changing, but the reality of this is never more vividly demonstrated than when we stage any one of our accessible performances. So it gives us great pride to lead an organisation that has invested so much time, commitment and resource in developing a holistic approach to making our work open to all.

We'd like to hope that that this Dementia Friendly Performance Guide might have the same positive impact on the theatre world that our pioneering work on Relaxed Performances has done, and that in years to come dementia friendly performances will similarly become a commonplace part of the accessible performance repertoire.

Foreword

by Wendy Mitchell, Blogger,
living positively with dementia

When you're diagnosed with dementia, the last thing you want to give up is something you enjoy. That's why I'm so pleased to be involved with West Yorkshire Playhouse in creating dementia friendly performances.

A visit to the theatre can bring so much joy and enable you to stay connected with the community around you. To share laughter and applause in the audience and watch wonderful performances can bring so much happiness. Simple adjustments to lighting, sound and accessibility can bring the opportunity to remain connected to so many.

I can no longer follow story lines and many would feel it was pointless for me to attend a performance. However I was asked by Nicky Taylor, at West Yorkshire Playhouse, to write a blog about my experience of attending a performance of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* recently. My overwhelming emotion was one of happiness. I hadn't followed the plot, but it didn't matter. I enjoyed sharing a wonderful time with the rest of the audience. I enjoyed the laughter, singing of familiar songs but most of all I enjoyed being part of the experience.

I encourage all theatres to follow West Yorkshire Playhouse's lead and allow people with dementia to continue to experience that wonderful feeling that only being part of an audience can bring.



Introduction

Nicky Taylor, Community Development Manager,
West Yorkshire Playhouse

In 2014 I approached the chief executives at West Yorkshire Playhouse with an idea to adapt one of our theatre productions to make it more accessible to people living with dementia.

Having led arts projects for people with dementia for several years it was clear to me that a creative environment helped people with dementia to thrive and communicate, contribute and in turn feel valued. Engagement with the arts provided clear, evidential and sometimes startling benefits for people living with dementia.

I initially organised visits to see shows at our theatre for small groups of people with dementia and, with a degree of considered additional support, these visits turned out to be incredibly successful. Participants engaged well with the themes of the plays, prompting them to share their own opinions and stories.

This approach clearly had the potential to be broadened to benefit more people living with dementia and those who support them. In December 2014 we subsequently adapted a matinee of *White Christmas* as the UK's first dementia friendly performance. Over 400 people attended, and feedback from visitors, staff, volunteers and performers was overwhelmingly positive.

A second successful dementia friendly performance - a matinee of our Spring 2015 production *Beryl* - followed. With the support of The Baring Foundation we were then able to share our template with two theatres who had shown great interest in the project - Curve, Leicester and Millennium Forum Theatre and Conference Centre, Derry/Londonderry - in addition to a number of rural venues hosting the Autumn 2015 tour of *Beryl*.

A 2016 matinee of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* attracted over 500 people, cementing dementia friendly performances as a regular element of West Yorkshire Playhouse programming. We anticipate great interest in our 2017 dementia friendly performance of the UK première of *Strictly Ballroom*.

With ongoing consultation and a huge amount of learning, we now have an established model of dementia friendly performances; a model that has a proven level of success for all participants, and that we are proud to share with colleagues in other theatres.

This Guide

This guide brings together perspectives from all those involved in the process. It draws on specific experiences from dementia friendly performances staged at West Yorkshire Playhouse, Curve and Millennium Forum.

The best people to inform dementia friendly adaptations are people with dementia. They are experts in living with the condition, and we advocate strongly for any theatre considering this approach to consult with people with dementia to ensure decisions are made with them, not for them.

Many people with dementia have spent a lifetime attending theatre, concerts and music halls. A diagnosis of dementia can reduce confidence and increase isolation, leaving people with dementia and their supporters less likely to attempt such trips. As life becomes more mundane, these stimulating, meaningful activities assume greater importance, and present significantly increased potential for enriching lives.

Our aspiration is to increase opportunities for people with dementia to access life-enhancing shows, reconnecting them to their local cultural venues and their communities. We hope theatres across the UK and beyond will find this practical guide an inspiration in advocating for and staging dementia friendly performances.



“The best people to inform dementia friendly adaptations are people with dementia. They are experts in living with the condition.”



“When you have got Alzheimer’s it’s so easy to think your life’s over and it isn’t. It’s a different life but it’s a very, very good life because there’s so much going on, and this sort of thing is brilliant.”

– audience member, West Yorkshire Playhouse

Language



People with dementia deserve to be seen as much more than ‘dementia sufferers’. While it is undeniable that people with dementia suffer some of the time, this one-dimensional term implies that there is little more to the person than the condition with which they are living.

The assumption is that suffering is the *limit* of what is possible when you have dementia, discounting the validity of engaging in enriching aspects of life including arts and culture. It also suggests that all people living with dementia are identical, ignoring the different aspects of experience and preference that make us individuals.

In recent years there has been a growing dementia rights movement led by people living with dementia. As with disability rights, people with dementia are asserting their own entitlement to equal engagement and access, rather than this simply being a goodwill gesture offered by some organisations.

Work to influence the use of specific terms relating to people with dementia has been led by the Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project (DEEP).

Language guidelines can be found by clicking on this link dementiavoices.org.uk



West Yorkshire Playhouse

has a long standing relationship with Irwin Mitchell Solicitors. This business sponsors the theatre's access performances and is keen to support new developments in this field including the UK's first dementia friendly performance – *White Christmas*.

Curve secured sponsorship for its dementia friendly performance of *Oliver!* from Rowleys Chartered Accountants – adding a new element to their existing relationship, offering new ways for their staff to engage with Curve as volunteers on the day. Brightly coloured t-shirts displayed the business logo alongside the title and image from the show.

Making A Case

A dementia friendly performance involves trialling new approaches, some of which may be considered a risk by chief executives. Naturally both benefits and costs should be considered.

Benefits To Your Theatre

Staging a dementia friendly performance can bring huge benefits to your theatre. As increasing numbers of towns and cities strive to become dementia friendly, arts organisations can be key in contributing to this agenda.

Benefits include:

- developing the skills of theatre staff, enabling them to put into practice their understanding of dementia with customers
- development teams can use dementia friendly performances as a high-profile means of enthusing potential funders. Corporate partners are particularly interested in being associated with innovative ideas which reach a new audience
- high levels of local government interest driven by a national dementia friendly communities agenda

“I think that West Yorkshire Playhouse is really leading the dementia friendly campaign in Leeds. It’s a high profile organisation setting very high standards of involvement; not just on big productions like this, but working all year round. The team are building a tremendous bank of knowledge about the things that work.”

- Maggie Graham, Campaign Manager, Dementia Friendly Leeds

Cost Considerations

A key member of staff will need to drive this idea forward. Depending on the theatre, that person might be based in one of a number of different departments. For example dementia friendly work at West Yorkshire Playhouse is led by a member of Creative Engagement, Curve by a producer and Millennium Forum by a member of Box Office. In all of the examples included in this guide there has been no requirement to employ an additional member of staff to coordinate the project.

Some extra hours may need to be allocated to the coordinator, and time should be set aside for additional planning and training with staff. If scheduled well in advance it is possible to avoid additional costs by working within existing contracted hours, however it may necessitate allocation of overtime to technical staff, front of house staff or performers.

Consulting with people with dementia is a crucial element of preparation and has costs attached such as travel expenses and refreshments. Payment of a fee to consultants is good practice and may go to the organisation supporting the consultant, or to the individuals themselves. When asking experts to share their knowledge it is usual to pay for this expertise – this should be no different simply because the consultants are living with dementia.

Staff training is crucial. Many organisations and individuals offer quality, in-depth training. However this need not be expensive. Dementia Friends information sessions offer a great introduction to understanding what it’s like to live with dementia, and how we can support people to live well with the condition. These sessions should be offered to staff as a minimum requirement.

Become a Dementia Friends Champion. Complete a **free** one-day training programme run by The Alzheimer’s Society’s national Dementia Friends campaign.

As a Dementia Friends Champion, host information sessions for colleagues in which people are able to ask questions and learn together.

“The Dementia Friends session was amazing, it opened my eyes wider to what it is like for people with dementia. I had a better understanding of day to day life and it made me want to help and be proactive.”

- Volunteer, West Yorkshire Playhouse



*“We attended creative sessions and our first ever play *The Deranged Marriage* at West Yorkshire Playhouse. Our group reflected on familiar themes in the show through discussion, with the actors. This enjoyable visit encouraged us to attend the dementia friendly performance of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, which really pushed the group out of their comfort zone. However it was so enjoyable and some people remembered watching the film with their children so the visit was a real success.”*

– Ripaljeet Kaur, Hamari Yaadain Dementia Café, Touchstone, Leeds

The Audience

It is important to acknowledge that people with dementia are not one homogenous group. They have different life experience, tastes and opinions.

A common misconception of dementia is that it makes people completely dependent on others in order to live. While this can be true during the later stages of dementia, this does not happen overnight once a diagnosis has been issued. Some people with dementia live highly independent lives, and can still negotiate a visit to the theatre. We can maintain their confidence in this by offering additional information, clearer signage and route markers, enabling them to navigate the environment unaided.

Conversely, some people with dementia may feel distressed if they are left alone, and theatre staff can help by reassuring them. Others might feel anxious in an unfamiliar environment, requiring assistance to guide them to their seats or to the café.

Each person with dementia has their own coping strategies and will have different expectations of what help they need. However, it is important to remember that neglecting to offer help because someone doesn't *look* like they have dementia can leave some people feeling unsupported, resulting in a stressful experience.

People with dementia have different levels of understanding and insight into their condition. Some people happily opt in to events targeted at people with dementia, while others prefer not to attend something that is labelled, or would rather not be repeatedly reminded of it once they have chosen to participate.

It is important to note that coming to the theatre is a normalising experience for people with dementia: we should not be constantly referring to dementia during their visit - while they are at the theatre they are simply our audience members.



Selecting A Show

People with dementia have tastes as varied and surprising as everyone else, so there is no universal, one size fits all approach. Each theatre has its own audience with specific expectations. Each community has its own treasured stories. No single show will work for everyone. There are, however, some important principles:

The show should be aimed at an adult audience

Respecting the adulthood of people with dementia is crucial. People with dementia are often infantilised, dismissing the value of their rich life history and experience.

Resources and materials aimed at children should not be used for people with dementia.

Ask people with dementia what they would like to see

People have differing tastes, but some shows fit more readily than others into an audience's frame of reference, relating to culture, generation or geography.

Dementia can also affect younger people

Around 40,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with dementia before the age of 65, therefore a show which focuses on, for example, wartime memories will only be relevant for some of the audience.

Musicals are a good choice

Evidence suggests that the brain processes music differently to other functions, allowing people with dementia to enjoy songs and music long after other abilities are challenged.

Consider the narrative

People with dementia can find it difficult to follow a plot, so a show that relies on a clear understanding of narrative can be problematic. However if this is a familiar story rooted in local history then some of these barriers can be overcome, and we shouldn't always choose the safe bet.



Beryl, 2015 - West Yorkshire Playhouse

"It was nice to hear all the references to familiar places in Leeds – people spoke about their connections to Beryl Burton – even the man who built her house was there! People reflected on happy memories of cycling in the city and on holiday."

- Maggie Graham, Dementia Friendly Leeds



Oliver!, 2016 - Curve

"Music is so important in connecting with memories and a musical, particularly a "traditional" one is a fantastic vehicle for this."

- Andy Hartshorn, Dementia Harborough



Aladdin, 2015 - Millennium Forum

"It's a good opportunity for reminiscence. Our women with families have taken their children to pantomimes in the past so I am hoping it will trigger some enjoyable memories. In this city we are well known for our pantomimes."

- Toni Strawbridge, Seven Oaks Nursing Home



Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, 2016 - West Yorkshire Playhouse

"Chitty Chitty Bang Bang reminds me so much of watching the film time and time again with my daughters, so I'm hoping for a lovely experience."

- Wendy Mitchell, Blogger, living positively with dementia



Involving Experts

When planning a dementia friendly performance, consultation with experts - people living with dementia - is the best place to start.

How does it feel to share your experience of living with dementia?

It's good to tell other people what it's like to have dementia so they get a feeling of what it's like, because an awful lot of people just think it's memory loss, but it's far more than that. Memory is very, very little compared to some of the other stuff. It's weird because I don't feel any different but it's just when something happens and you think 'here we go again' and you just have to get on with it. It's very, very tiring, that's the one thing about dementia, it really does sap everything. You get very tired.

What particular aspects are you looking out for when you consult on dementia friendly performances?

It's certainly the sound - when it starts to ramp up and when there are loud bangs it just goes right to your core. It's horrendous and you just want to get right out of the facility. I don't know what it is because live music is no problem for me. And when we go round and have a look at things like stairs and lifts - I've got the visual and spatial problem and that is very, very scary so when I can get that point across I feel that's really good.

How does it feel to see that your suggestions have been taken on board?

Brilliant! I'm just so glad to be able to help, so that other people can enjoy the performance and not get the horrible feelings, like the jumpy feeling that I get in my gut when something's too loud.

Are you excited that more theatres might start to offer dementia friendly performances?

Oh absolutely yes, you can just imagine somebody who really wants to go and see a production and they're scared to go, because what if it's too loud? And what if the stairs are too high, or whatever? There must be loads of people who are scared to go because of the 'what if' factor and if they know that it's all dementia friendly then perhaps they'll be able to go and see theatre.

You're part of a group called EDUCATE, one of the many Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project (DEEP) groups across the country. How can groups like these help others to understand the experience of dementia?

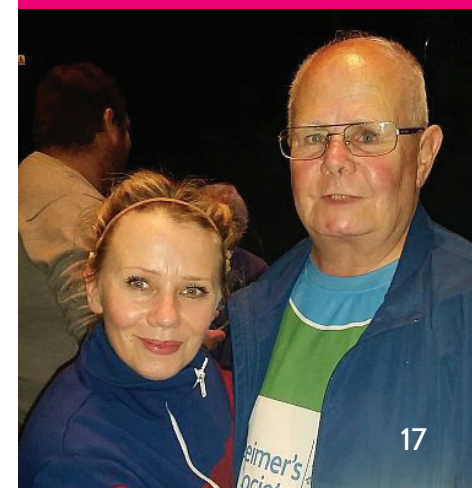
I love being with EDUCATE because everybody's like me - we've all got dementia of some sort so we're on the same page. First and foremost we're all in dementia together - we've got a common experience, but we can also spread the word. When I'm asked to give a talk on my story it gives me a lift, it makes me feel really good. And the feedback we get is really interesting. One woman came up and said 'thank you for taking the fear away' and that's really stuck with me. That's all through EDUCATE, and I just love doing it.

Do you have a sense of pride at your role in developing dementia friendly performances?

Well I hadn't really thought about that - it's just because little old me has got Alzheimer's, but then I think 'Wow, this is good!' I've never been busier than I am at the moment, it's incredible. It's amazing and I'm loving every minute of it!

"There were a few loud bangs in a crash scene and a bang from a starter pistol, but it did not show a pistol had been fired. I suggested that one of the actors could have a starter pistol, so the dementia friendly crowd knew the bang was coming at the start of the race."

- Ken Ingram consulted on West Yorkshire Playhouse's production of *Beryl*



We interviewed **Jo Bennett** who has consulted on three dementia friendly performances;

White Christmas and *Beryl* at West Yorkshire Playhouse and *Oliver!* at Curve.



Adapting A Show

A dementia friendly performance should be the same show experienced by every other audience on any other day of the run, with a few slight adaptations. It should be created in partnership with the show's creative and technical team, and should not feel compromised artistically or technically.

Take the expert advice of your colleagues in production and encourage their ownership of any necessary adaptations. If possible, programme your dementia friendly performance later in the run, giving you time to adapt any technical aspects thoroughly and with integrity.

Begin with consultation

Invite several people with dementia to attend a dress rehearsal or an early performance of a standard show. Act on their feedback and on what you observe. It may be very clear when something is uncomfortable - people might literally jump out of their seats on hearing a loud sound effect - or they may not be able to process the action in a particular scene.



- Paul Hudson, The King's and Festival Theatres, Edinburgh

Lighting and Visual Effects

Most people will not need to leave their seats or move about once the show has started. However for the few who might, it is helpful to have the house lights up slightly, at around 15%. Any higher and people will feel self conscious, detracting from their enjoyment of the show. This audience will be ready for the lights to go down - it's a normal part of the theatre experience.

However, sudden or full blackouts on stage can be disorientating and disturbing for people with dementia. As mentioned above, a small degree of house lighting can counter darker moments on stage, but a decision to soften any abrupt lighting cues - making them considerably more subtle - will make a positive difference.

"PC Plod comes out into the audience at the start of the show, he's spot lit, there are light beams going out into the audience and he runs through the auditorium with sirens going. Now the lights are all going to stay on the stage and he's going to stay on stage."

- John Brannigan, Stage Technician, *Aladdin*, Millennium Forum



"We've changed between 50 and 60 cues for this show."

There's a scene where Chitty turns into a hovercraft to escape from the Vulgarian ship, with a lot of explosions and lightning and big smoke effects. We've toned down the smoke so it's not spilling out into the audience as much."

We've also taken out all the flashing explosions and strobe lights completely because they are quite loud and big. The sound effects are still in, but are just not as loud and in your face."

- Chris Speight,
Production Electrician,
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang,
West Yorkshire Playhouse

“I’ve had to tone down some of the really loud levels to take away those really big crescendos and dynamics that we get on a show like this. A big orchestra produces a massive sound, but for some people with dementia it can become a bit too much. So we’ve toned that down, both in the mix and the big impact sound effects including some thunders, cannon balls and crashes.”

- Rob Smith, Sound No 1,
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang,
West Yorkshire Playhouse

Sound

Achieving comfortable sound levels can be a challenge. We need to consider the ability of people with dementia to process sound, while acknowledging that many older people with dementia are hard of hearing: simply dropping levels too low means people may miss out. The best way to achieve this is to ask people with dementia to give you feedback, and work with your sound designer and technical crew to find the best balance.

Some people with dementia find higher pitched sounds painful, particularly crescendos. Some may bring ear plugs to the performance to counter this, but most will not, so consider how you can make these moments more comfortable for audience members.

People with dementia can also find it difficult to process multiple layers of sound, therefore each show should be reviewed in the context of sound design and the stage action. If possible, consider stripping away some layers of competing sounds.

“The band has been turned down to very little, the drums won’t even be in the PA tonight. The vocals will be there but there’s a lot of thunder and lightning and big voices filled with reverb that are supposed to sound creepy, so those sound effects will drop.”

- Rory Harkin, Stage Technician, *Aladdin*, Millennium Forum

Stage Action

Work with your performance team - the acting company, director, assistant director or choreographer. They will know the show inside out and can advise on the types of responses they get from audience members. Are there moments that are particularly threatening or raucous?

Some moments might happen too quickly for people with dementia to process - holding a key moment slightly to reinforce the storytelling can help, as can emphasising some lines for clarity. Often it can be possible to support audience members’ comfort levels simply by softening the edges of a scene.

Stage action involving entrances and exits through the audience should be reconsidered if possible. It can be disconcerting for an audience member to suddenly feel they are in the middle of the action with follow spot lighting, sudden movement and unfamiliar people around them.

Meet with your actors and musicians beforehand. Reassure them that none of the adaptations need detract from the performance but will in fact bring the audience into the production. Give the performers confidence to know that this particular audience is as invested as any other, possibly more so. Keep your performers aware of the project as there may be some who are especially keen to be involved in the process.

“The talk we were given was amazingly informative and it was great to be given the dementia information packs. We were very well prepared by Playhouse staff.”

- Cast member, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*

“After the briefing, the young company were asking such positive questions about the audience and some of the boys were answering each other. They were saying ‘Let’s make it the best performance we’ve done’. It was really lovely for us backstage to watch.”

- Amanda Grant, Chaperone, *Oliver!*, Curve



In the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang number Me Ol' Bamboo there are multiple layers of band, singing, tap dancing, banging canes, cheering and spoken or shouted exchanges on stage.

We worked with the company to strip away some of the additional sounds whilst leaving the feel of the number in tact. We removed cheering and spoken or shouted exchanges, and took the band sound levels down.

This enabled people to focus on the spectacular song and dance, and did not detract from the storytelling.

- Nicky Taylor,
West Yorkshire Playhouse

Meet and Greet

If possible, give your audience the opportunity to meet the company immediately after the show. This has proved to be a consistent highlight for audience and company members alike. It is a unique chance for people with dementia and their supporters to feel valued and excited, while company members have found, often unexpectedly, a renewed connectedness both with the audience and within the company itself.

Obviously, nothing is compulsory - some company members may have a familial connection with someone living with dementia, and may not wish to engage in the meet and greet. Similarly, some audience members may have transport waiting for them and will be keen to leave immediately. This variation will facilitate an unhurried, calm emptying of the auditorium, allowing more staff to assist those who are leaving than would be available if everyone exited at the same time.



“There’s such a warmth in the auditorium, a sea of humility - people are willing the performers on and being a part of it in a way that a regular audience often isn’t.”

– Nikolai Foster,
Artistic Director, Curve

Company Feedback



“As an actor to re-evaluate what you are doing on stage for a brand new set of people was actually a really useful exercise. It’s great for the company - everyone gets to really enjoy what they’re doing and make the story as clear as we can make it.”

– Jon Robyns, Caractacus Potts,
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang,
West Yorkshire Playhouse

“It lifted our performance - when we exited the stage after various scenes and songs you just wanted to run off and tell someone else about the experience you just had on the stage.”

– Emma Harrold, Ensemble,
Oliver!, Curve

“It’s incredibly important for people with dementia, and for carers, to have a really free environment with no embarrassment. It becomes a real community of give and take. Some performances just come and go but these ones are really fulfilling for everyone.”

– Tamsin Carroll, Baroness Bomburst,
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang,
West Yorkshire Playhouse



“I met a couple in their 90s, who haven’t been to the theatre in years because of the stress of it. She said at the end “I didn’t think we’d ever come again but here we are”. And I was like, wow, this is a big deal. It’s like giving them their lives back, as a family, they were so happy they’d had such a lovely afternoon.”

– Jenna Boyd, Widow Corney, Oliver!, Curve

Creative Sessions

It is possible to enhance people's experience of the show, and their comfort levels, by engaging with audience members before they come to the performance. Consider the content and themes of the show - is there a way to engage with people through music, art or reminiscence?

Musicals and plays with music

Pre-show singing sessions work beautifully for a musical or a play with music. They help people connect emotionally to the show prior to taking their seats.

Working with the show's musical director, choose songs from the show that are recognisable, accessible and well spaced throughout the performance. Facilitators can then lead sessions which are enjoyable and meaningful. Any prospective nerves tend to be replaced by laughter as people with dementia participate on an equal basis with those supporting them, all voices equally valid.

Provide song sheets for the show itself and encourage people to sing along, having made the performers aware that this may happen.

Offer pre-show singing sessions in, for example, memory cafes and care homes, day centres and at the theatre itself on the day of the performance, and encourage local independent singing groups for people with dementia to engage with songs from the show.

"It was so fantastic to see people genuinely engaging. We had a conversation before the show about music stimulating memory for people with dementia, and it's so apparent, just how much they can recall with the music and how much it means to them. It's been wonderful, such a privilege."

- Oliver Boot, Bill Sykes, *Oliver!*, Curve





Narratives

For a more narrative-driven piece you might choose to build creative sessions around themes from the show itself.

The creative sessions that preceded West Yorkshire Playhouse's production of *Beryl* concentrated on themes of cycling, place, motherhood, travel and sporting participation. Cycling memorabilia, vintage and modern bike parts and archive photos of Beryl Burton elicited responses from people with dementia. These included memories and feelings about cycling, connections to places where Beryl raced, and opinions on cycling today compared with 30-50 years ago.

"Cycling feels like flying" - participant, reminiscence session

A writer supported participants in combining these responses into poetry.

BICYCLE

Brave, breath-taking
Intrepid and inspirational
Character building, captivating
Yorkshire grit in a yellow jersey
Camaraderie, Campag knees
Loyalty
Endurance, enthusiasm, exhilaration.

- Poem by participants in *Cycling Memories* workshop, *Beryl* Tour
CAST, Doncaster.

These creative sessions are not only beneficial in themselves, they also directly enhance the experience of watching the show, encouraging recognition of themes, musical participation and heightened alertness and concentration at specific moments.



"When you get to a certain age and you are indoors all day, getting out like this is so worthwhile."

- audience member, West Yorkshire Playhouse

Selling The Show

Selling a dementia friendly performance requires some preparation, but these guidelines will ensure that staff are well-informed, confident and relaxed when communicating with customers.

Website

If possible, add a specific page on your venue's website dedicated to the dementia friendly performance, containing all applicable details and information.

Leaflet

Produce a specific show leaflet to share all relevant information in an accessible, dementia friendly style. Consider the font and colour contrast, and remove any superfluous information contained in generic show leaflets. Consult with people with dementia to ensure the leaflet is clear and appealing.



One of the world's favourite musicals
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
will have you flying high

Dementia-friendly performance
Tuesday 19 January 2016 at 1.30pm
Tickets £12

DF

What does the dementia-friendly performance involve?
We work closely with people living with dementia, consulting them on the changes needed for the show and front of house environment. We consider everything from sound and lighting cues, stage action and seating plans, signage and refreshment service.

We offer extra flexibility when booking seats, so if you know you need a little extra personal space you can request that the seat next to you remains unsold. A quiet room outside the auditorium is also available if you need some time away from the crowd.

We are proud that over 120 West Yorkshire Playhouse staff and volunteers are Dementia Friends (dementiafriends.org.uk), turning their understanding of dementia into action.

If there's another aspect of the theatre experience we could address to make a positive difference for you, please get in touch.

Pre-show Singing Sessions
Start to connect with the music from the show through our singing sessions (dates below). Sing along to familiar songs such as Truly Scrumptious, Me O' Bamboo and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Fri 11 Dec, 2pm - 3pm
Mon 11 Jan, 2pm - 3pm
Tue 19 Jan, 11.30am - 12pm
Tue 19 Jan, 12.15pm - 12.45pm

To book free tickets for a pre-show singing session call Nicky Taylor on 0113 213 7296.

The Show
Whacky inventor, Caractacus Potts, his children and Truly Scrumptious try to outwit Baron Bomburst who has decreed that all children be banished from his kingdom. Will it all end happily ever after? Well, of course it will!

Book tickets 0113 213 7700
email groups@wyp.org.uk
West Yorkshire Playhouse, Quarry Hill, Leeds LS2 7UP

Photos by Anthony Robling

Examples of dementia friendly show leaflets are available to view on our website



Box Office

Box Office staff are often the first point of contact, so they should be provided with a list of FAQs to ensure they have all relevant information at their fingertips, ready to confidently share with customers. People with dementia and their supporters will know that they are being heard, understood and welcomed.

The seating plan for a dementia friendly performance should give audience members plenty of options:

Aisle seats will be in high demand. Some audience members may use a mobility aid such as a walking frame to get to their seat. Some families may worry that their relative may not settle or will need easy access to toilet facilities, making aisle seats a more favourable choice.

Ensure there are plenty of wheelchair spaces available and increase capacity if possible. A seat should always be available for a companion directly next to each wheelchair user's space.

Be mindful of the constraints of your auditorium in relation to seating requirements for group bookings. It can be difficult when people in the same group have differing needs and require the group to sit together, for example, when seats nearest wheelchair spaces are sold out and the group may need to be split.

Give people the option of choosing that the seat next to them remains unsold. In practice this is rarely taken up, but it offers more personal space if needed, and is another confidence-builder for those considering attending.

Similarly, leave some areas of the auditorium unsold so people can move to alternative seating if they wish to. This will also benefit those who may arrive late and have difficulty reaching their seats once the show has started.

Information Pack

Once a booking has been taken, the customer should be provided with a comprehensive information pack. This will be absolutely crucial in helping customers plan the logistics of their visit. It should include details such as location of the theatre, drop off points, parking facilities, toilet facilities, refreshment services and interval times. It should also contain helpful supplementary information advising people of coins taken at nearby car park payment machines, for example, or pointing out that volunteers will be on hand to wait with people who have been dropped off close to the theatre while their supporter parks the car. These details boost the confidence of customers, alongside their trust in your staff and venue.

Plot Synopsis

Provide a synopsis of the show and send this out with tickets and the information pack - people with dementia can find it difficult to follow a story and this information can give their supporter the chance to clarify the stage action for them. This will also flag up potential triggers in the story which might provide particular enjoyment or anxiety: a person with dementia may have life experiences which are reflected in the play, resulting in positive or negative emotions and responses. Being prepared for this can enable supporters to reassure, or positively encourage sharing of memories.



“It was lovely being able to see a show with my husband. The reduced rate made it possible as the cost of theatre tickets are now too expensive for us. Due to his dementia he falls asleep a lot and I would have been uncomfortable in a normal show.”

– audience member,
West Yorkshire Playhouse

Preparing the Space

It requires a little more thought to get things right for people with dementia, but many of these changes and alterations can be made with minimal or no cost. Thorough preparation will prove invaluable on the day, and for this reason most of the work should happen well before people take their seats for the show.



“The training made you far more aware of the things that could cause a problem for people, things you don’t even think about – like shiny floors, and not understanding the signage. So you are more alert to people in general, not just at a dementia friendly performance.”

- Lisa Lynch, Box Office, Millennium Forum

Quality training - a detailed briefing coupled with Dementia Friends sessions for example - is a must. Confidence, both for audience members and theatre staff, is one of the most important factors of a dementia friendly performance. Training will enable staff to feel fully connected to the event and empowered to support customers with dementia. It should be offered to box office, attendants/ushers, café, housekeeping and sales staff, and all other staff or volunteers supporting the event.

Use the specialist knowledge of your colleagues. Each member of staff is an expert in their own area of the theatre and will already be aware of areas that work well for customers, and those that could use some improvement. Use this knowledge to collaborate in making adaptations for each aspect of the theatre experience. Encouraging staff to own these adaptations is exciting and unifying, and will have the added benefit of creating a theatre which is more accessible to people with dementia during standard shows.

Before the show

Audit

First and foremost, begin with an audit of the theatre. It is important to see the environment through the eyes of people with dementia. Invite people with dementia - your auditors - to look at the spaces you will be using and to give you feedback.

Invite people with dementia who know your theatre well alongside those who have never previously visited, to get the broadest range of responses. Ask them to consider every aspect of the experience: arriving at the car park or main entrance, the café, toilet facilities, ticket collection, navigating routes, stairs, lifts, lighting, sound, furniture and service.

The feedback you receive from your auditors will form the backbone of any alterations you need to make to the environment.

Familiarisation

Offer visits to individuals or group leaders so they can assess the environment before the event. This is particularly useful for larger groups who may have a variety of support needs to consider. A personalised approach enables theatre staff to discover individuals' needs and to plan ahead accordingly.



On a familiarisation visit with staff from a care home, I learned that one of our customers was a woman who spent most of the day standing up. She felt restless and anxious if she sat for too long.

Having this knowledge enabled me to offer her a standing area in one of our latecomers boxes.

The result was that she could stand comfortably during the show in a safe area away from any stairs, and her choice to stand did not cause inconvenience or discomfort for other audience members who were accustomed to watching a show from their seats.

With prior knowledge we were able to accommodate her preference and ensure that her support needs were met.

- Nicky Taylor,
West Yorkshire Playhouse.



On the day

Arrival

Feedback consistently demonstrates that one of the most positive aspects of a dementia friendly performance is the presence of warm, friendly members of staff as customers arrive at the venue.

Ensure there are plenty of staff on hand to smile, assist and reassure visitors when needed. Pay particular attention to where people are being dropped off and where cars will be parked. Consider having staff or volunteers to assist with car park payment machines.

“It has been so nice to see so many purple t-shirts everywhere. Knowing there are lots of staff nearby to help is very reassuring.”

– audience member, West Yorkshire Playhouse

Assign staff to wait with people who are being dropped off in case of disorientation, and provide additional seating – such as fold-up chairs – at drop off points where people may need to wait as a group gathers.

Look at your theatre’s point of entry – does it clearly look like an entrance? Reflective glass doors can be difficult to perceive for people living with dementia. If necessary, employ extra signage to mark the entrances, and to ensure people do not walk into glass doors.

How far must people walk to the nearest seating? Consider putting chairs along the main route.

Assist route-finding with extra signage and/or staff wearing clearly-identifiable t-shirts to guide people.

The Auditorium

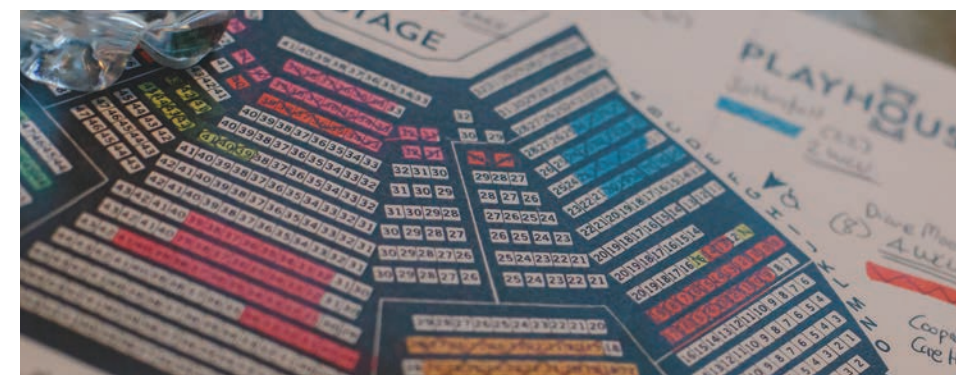
Provide staff with a copy of the seating plan (provided by Box Office) – showing any larger groups or groups that may need specific assistance. It may then be helpful to assign individual staff to assist these groups throughout their visit.

Allow more time for people to take their seats by opening the house earlier. Many audience members may have limited mobility and will not wish to feel rushed and anxious as they make their way into the auditorium.

Have members of staff available to assist people on stairs en route to their seats, and to help them settle in to the auditorium.

If possible, provide additional space for storing mobility aids, and have staff on hand to reunite the aid with the person who needs it at the interval and the end of the show.

More generally, staff must be well spaced around the auditorium throughout the show to assist if people need to move around or leave.



“Basically it’s approaching people with an understanding that they are maybe not going to be aware of where they actually are. You can’t just say ‘you’re in Row F, Seat 24’ and shine a torch as we normally do. So we’ll approach them in a friendly manner, guide them and not overpower them with information – just get them seated comfortably and say ‘I hope you enjoy the show’.”

– Alan Little, Usher, Millennium Forum



Front of House

Make it easier for people to navigate the space through use of clear signage with good colour contrast - such as bold black type on a white background - or use symbols or pictures for extra clarity. People are unlikely to be familiar with the geography of the theatre - it may be their first visit in a long time or they may not be able to recall their last visit.

Position staff and volunteers in bright t-shirts to act as a visual cue for people to follow. Placing staff at key points of decision-making is enormously helpful: they are able to offer friendly guidance or direction to people who may be anxious or uncertain of the route.

Ensure that all areas are well lit, particularly entrances, exits and stairways. A few well-placed extra lamps are beneficial.

Remove any unnecessary clutter of signage or displays: they can make the environment distracting and confusing.

Signage is very simple to get right if people with dementia are consulted.

Consider the sounds of the front of house environment. Is there anything that is not essential? Remove as many competing sounds as possible, such as video screens or background music.

Allocate a quiet space where people can spend time if they wish. This can help if someone is feeling overwhelmed or unwell. The space should be easily accessible but away from the hustle and bustle.

Consider having a screen showing a live relay of the show for people to continue watching if they have had to leave the auditorium. This can be valuable for family or carers who may feel they are missing out if the person they support is unsettled in the auditorium.

“It was nice to have the interval to walk about and see natural light as it was quite a long time to sit – once again, the volunteers were there to help. Signage around the building was simple, straight-forward and in all the right places - brilliant!”

– Wendy Mitchell, Blogger, living positively with dementia

Toilet Facilities

Toilets should be easily accessible and well signed.

Toilet facilities are particularly important as they are so closely linked with people’s dignity. Once inside, multiple doors can be confusing and people with dementia may struggle to find their way out. A simple ‘exit’ sign on the appropriate door is an easy solution. Modern taps and hand dryers are not always immediately recognisable for their intended use - signage will help to indicate their purpose.

Café and Refreshments

Furniture should be easily movable to accommodate people’s needs.

Provide a clear, easy to read menu, using pictures if possible, to help people make their choice.

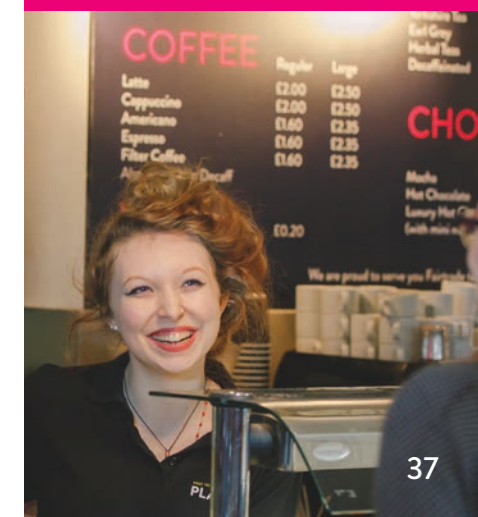
Consider reserving tables for groups, and offering a pre-order option. This will prevent decisions having to be made under pressure.

Note the contrast between surfaces - white plates on a white table will make eating difficult for people if they are unable to perceive where their plate is. Simply adding a plain, brightly coloured tablecloth could help.

Ask people in advance about their requirements. Ensure there are plenty of staff available to help carry food and drinks, and to assist people in choosing tables and seats. Have plenty of napkins available in case of spillages, and straws to make drinking easier.

“We got the menu sent in advance, chose what we wanted to eat and phoned our order through before we arrived. We had a reserved spot, they brought all the food out, which was fantastic and it was just really easy going. Then the staff and volunteers took us to our seats - we didn’t lose anybody, had toilet stops on the way, no-one was rushed. Everything was 10 out of 10.”

– Kim Finch, Baidon Community Link





Who Is Involved?

This is a chance for real collaboration and a fantastic opportunity to invite others to be part of the event.

Volunteers

Volunteers will enhance the experience for audience members, ensuring that plenty of help and assistance is available throughout the event.

A dementia friendly performance shouldn't be mono-generational - many people with dementia spend most of their time surrounded by older people, so having a mix of ages in the audience and the event team is both normalising and positive.

Connect with your local primary school, college or scout group and arrange for some of the students to act as volunteers, helping to sell ice creams or collect litter during the interval.

Consider leading a Dementia Friends session for the students beforehand, giving them confidence and encouragement, and a greater understanding of dementia friendly communities.



Sponsors and funders

Sponsors and funders are usually keen to involve their own staff in supporting the event. This can broaden understanding of the aims and benefits of the project, and also potentially secure further financial support.

Support organisations

Consider inviting support organisations for people with dementia to host stalls or to share information, but any such presence should be kept low key and subtle.

A trip to the theatre is a rare chance for people with dementia to participate in a 'normal' activity, and not to be reminded of their dementia.

"Anybody who comes to the theatre is here to enjoy themselves and be entertained."

- Alan Little, Usher, Millennium Forum

"I really thought dementia was black and white, and it's not. Each person is individual. The more people with that understanding the better."

- Paddy Gillespie, Waiter, Millennium Forum



"As Access Partner, Irwin Mitchell Solicitors is a proud long-term supporter of this initiative and has seen first-hand the fantastic work which is done on these special performances. It's also an opportunity for our employees to engage with the arts and be ambassadors for a firm making a positive contribution to our community."

- Paula Myers, Irwin Mitchell Solicitors

Audience Benefits

A decision to stage a dementia friendly performance is positive. The realisation of that decision, if carried through with detail and integrity, can be extraordinarily beneficial. Evidence has shown that engagement with the arts for people with dementia enhances mood, alertness and concentration, and can lead to increased confidence, self-expression and connection with others.

We hope that this guide will prove a thorough, useful resource in mounting a dementia friendly performance. It exists out of a passion to bring the positive impact of the arts to people living with dementia and those closest to them, and a wider belief in greater access to the arts for all.

Feedback

“I realised the adaptations to the show itself are only part of the story, it’s all the support and welcome that’s on hand, plus singing workshops and the overall sense of occasion that makes it work. A group next to me from a care home were singing along and chatting about the action as it went along. Normally talking at the theatre would seem wrong but it showed engagement in the story.”

– Tim Sanders, NHS Leeds Clinical Commissioning Groups / Leeds City Council



“Even if somebody doesn’t remember they’ve attended a performance, there’s every chance they will feel happy afterwards. They might not know why but having this emotional boost might really help them for a few days - feeling good about themselves and part of their community.”

– Natalie Rodriguez, Programme Manager, Dementia Friends

“Oh I enjoyed the singing very much. I like a good sing-song and a kick-your-legs up!”

– audience member,
West Yorkshire Playhouse



“Having the front two rows of seats made it really special, we really felt part of it. And we appreciated the tea and coffee served at our seats at the interval.”

– Andy Hartshorn,
Dementia Harborough



“I enjoyed Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. I loved the comedy - we need a bit of lightness when people are poorly.”

– audience member,
West Yorkshire Playhouse



“A lady said ‘I think it’s absolutely marvellous, it gets me out the house’. She was really appreciative of what was happening here and seeing so many other people in the same situation as her.”

– Vanita Maisuria,
Café Assistant, Curve

“She said ‘You’re all smiling!’ It’s an open, welcoming environment that you hope inspires people, especially if they’ve been nervous, to think ‘I can do this again. I made it through. I was really worried about coming but actually it all turned out all right. I can do this’.”

– Verity Hunt-Sheppard,
Usher, Curve



“I’ve been telling everyone about the whole experience and all the things you implemented to make things that bit easier. It has really inspired me and painted a picture for me of the world as it could be - dementia-friendly! It gives me tingles just thinking about it!”

– Daisy Robson,
Dementia Friends



About the Author

Nicky Taylor is Community Development Manager at West Yorkshire Playhouse. She develops innovative methods of connecting people with the arts, and has over twenty years' experience working with older people focusing on arts, health and wellbeing.

In 2010 she initiated a new programme enabling people with dementia to explore the world of a producing theatre through props and costume, poetry, song and storytelling. She conceived and led the UK's first Dementia Friendly Performance of a mainstream theatre show, informed by her own practice and drawing on the expertise of community partners in the dementia care sector.

Among other projects at West Yorkshire Playhouse, Nicky leads Heydays, the flagship participatory arts project for over 55s which sees over 300 older people engage in vibrant, creative activities each week.

Nicky pioneered Relaxed Performances - adapting mainstream theatre shows for young people with learning disabilities. She has an MSc in Dementia Studies from the University of Bradford, and is a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellow researching and sharing practice on arts and dementia internationally.

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For more information

Visit our website and download extra resources by clicking on this link wyp.org.uk

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