

Access Week at The Edinburgh Fringe

This year, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival held its first ever access week dedicated to providing access to all. The festival organisers have taken note of demands for better access, providing audio description, touch tours, better venue access for wheelchair users, and access for deaf and hard of hearing festival-goers. For example, they provided BSL translations, speech-to-text for talks and conferences, some captioned shows and also international subtitled theatre and physical theatre.

Something I learnt very quickly when going to the Edinburgh Festival, especially for access week and BSL performances: book early to avoid disappointment. The BSL shows sold out fast - this was due to the popularity of the big name comedians and performers, such as Daniel Sloss and Craig Hill. The captioned shows also sold out quickly. The Fringe box office opens in June every year, so there is every opportunity to get tickets booked in advance.

Often, people arrive and have no idea where to start. Everything from a book festival, Jazz festival, dance and physical theatre, exhibitions, comedy and film fill the city with a giant celebration of culture. Until recently, there was little access for deaf people. Perhaps a couple of captioned or BSL interpreted performances, but nothing like the choice I discovered this year. It was a novelty to be able to access two comedy shows through BSL. I discovered the importance of letting managers or ushers know that you are there for BSL. You can go to the front of the queue and get seats on the right side of the stage – there are rarely reserved seats. Keep this in mind and arrive early to performances to get to the front and ask which side of the stage the interpreter will be.

Some festival staff seemed deaf aware and some could have done with deaf awareness training. However, all staff were willing to ensure that our experience was a positive one, and there was a friendly atmosphere, making people easy to approach to ask about something. At the Fringe Box Office, there was a staff member trained in BSL to assist with any enquiries and to help with ticket bookings.

There were only three captioned theatre shows in Edinburgh this year, which was a little disappointing, given the number of theatre shows in the city. However, the three performances were for diverse shows that showcased the range of talent at the Fringe. Again, making theatre staff aware that you are there for captions means that you get the chance to find a good seat. For some book readings and talks at the book festival, you had to put in your request for BSL or speech-to-text interpretation in advance, as a new on demand service was piloting this year. There were also plenty of BSL book readings and talks in the programme. The Fringe guides were invaluable, and necessary to check the accessibility options. It was impressive, and though not perfect, a big leap forward for access.